

Written by Oyuki Konno  
Illustrated by Reine Hibiki

Translated by Enn are  
Editing from Baka-Tsuki  
Typesetting by Saveric

COBALT-SERIES

# マリア様がみてる

すず かせ

涼風さつさつ

今野緒雪

集英社

# Volume 14

## Cool Breeze

### Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from preschool to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

Autumn has a somewhat "lonely" or "melancholic" image, perhaps because it sees off the lively summer.

But when all's said and done, that's just its image. For high-school girls taking part in its various events, the reality is that they don't have much spare time to sigh at the passing seasons, or shed tears with the falling leaves.

Obviously, they'll feel the heat and the cold as long as they live, but there's all sorts of other things happening besides the seasons or the weather.

Most of those things are like a small breeze that quickly blows past.



# The First Step

## Part 1.

Opening the calming sky-blue door, they found something that seemed completely out of place at a girls school and were enveloped in a strange atmosphere.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

Hearing the carefree voice of Rei, the advance guard, the guests' attention was drawn to the single entrance. Then they all seemed to recover at once and each one individually uttered a soft exclamation like, "Huh" or "Whoa." Well, that's just putting it into words for the sake of narrative, in truth the sounds they made couldn't accurately be captured in words.

But still, "Whoa." What was this, a safari?

No, this was Lillian's Girls Academy. No doubt about that.

But inside was the uncommon, no, the almost unheard of sight of male students in their long jackets with stand-up collars called "gakuran."

Still, those earlier sounds were not the cries of "Alright" or "Yeah" from their world. Their voices were in no way menacing.

However.

Someone who wasn't inured to the ways of men may not be able to make such a judgment.

"Onee-sama ... "

Yumi gently reached out and held her onee-sama's hand before she could freeze in the doorway.

"I'm alright."

Sachiko-sama squeezed her hand tightly and smiled. The way she was forcing her cheeks to rise in a smile made it look like she had a cramp, but just like she said, she was managing somehow.

The atmosphere may not have been as familiar as that of the Rose Mansion but this was still a part of Lillian's Girls Academy. A wonderful location.

"It must be more stressful for them."

Sachiko-sama said, mostly for her own benefit, then followed Rei-sama inside.

"Welcome, gentlemen of the Hanadera Academy student council. Ah, please have a seat."

Filled with pride. In her usual regal demeanor. The princess that hated to lose stepped onto the battlefield to wipe away her previous disgrace.

Following on from Sachiko-sama was Shimako-san, then Yumi and Yoshino-san entered the council room together. Shimako-san was aware of Sachiko-sama's condition and had urged Yumi to go ahead of her, but the plan had been for the Roses to enter first and Sachiko-sama wouldn't want to appear as though she was weak and unable to do anything without her petit soeur.

The truth was that Sachiko-sama would react negatively if she thought they were being too considerate of her, so she could be quite difficult to handle. And when she reacted negatively she wouldn't just pout like a child, instead she'd get angry, saying things like, "Are you looking down on me?"

Inside the room there were four folding tables pushed together in a 2x2 arrangement, with six chairs along each of the long edges for the Hanadera and Lillian's student council representatives.

Yumi thought it was somewhat reminiscent of a group meeting for arranged marriages. Come to think of it, she remembered something like this from an old TV show. From memory, the person in the last seat was the joker, or something like that.

With that in mind, Yumi examined Hanadera's tail-ender. And who should be sitting there but her younger brother, Yuuki. The seat opposite, on Lillian's side, was currently empty but the plan was for Noriko-chan to sit there since she was the only first-year.

Yuuki versus Noriko-chan. Now then, who will be the better joker and draw the most laughs – wait, that's not right.

In other words, today was the do-over of the introductory meeting between the Hanadera and Lillian student council executives.

There had been talk of holding it at Hanadera Academy but they agreed to come to Lillian's on account of Sachiko-sama's condition. Even so, there were still doubts about suddenly inviting them to the Rose Mansion, so in the end they got permission to use the meeting room on the second-floor of the library.

After Noriko-chan filled the paper cups with barley tea from a thermos and handed them out, and just as it was looking like it was about time to begin the mutual self-introductions, Sachiko-sama stood up and spoke.

"Before we begin, I'd like to thank you for coming all the way out here."

The gakuran brigade simultaneously bowed their heads, signaling that it was, "No trouble at all."

"Before we do the self-introductions, I'd like to apologize. I'm deeply sorry that the previous introductory meeting had to be canceled on account of my poor health, even though it had been such a wonderful opportunity."

In truth, Sachiko-sama had received quite a shock when she saw the wide variety of people in the Hanadera Academy high-school student council but she didn't mention that, stubbornly sticking to the line about "poor health."

"I hope you're feeling better."

Yuuki's friend, Kobayashi-kun, spoke up. Just by changing his clothes he'd upgraded his image from a delinquent to a maths geek, someone that anyone would feel comfortable talking to.

"Yes, thankfully I've fully recovered."

Sachiko-sama smiled weakly.

"It must have been heatstroke. Summers are tough for me."

Keep at it, keep at it. Sachiko-sama was still doing her best to act as though she was totally fine with men, but it was a big step to take.

The Hanadera students were encamped in their uniforms.

The young men facing them seemed more reserved than when they'd met in their street clothes, perhaps consciously trying not to be too showy.

Yumi thought that Sachiko-sama wouldn't have been so disturbed if they'd been like this for the first encounter. But today probably only came about because of that intense meeting during summer vacation.

"Well then, why don't we start the introductions with us from Hanadera. We can go by age, like we're seated ... what do you say, Yukichi?"

Kobayashi-kun asked the last-placed Yuuki. Which meant there were no first-years on the Hanadera student council. Yuuki was born just before the school year cut-off on the first of April. That's why they were in the same grade despite Yumi being almost a year older than him. If he hadn't been born prematurely he would have comfortably made it into the subsequent year's intake. He'd had it tough even when he was being born.

"Alright, you can start, Nikkou-sempai."

Yuuki spoke to the guy seated first. Then, not only did he stand up, but so did the boy next to him.

"Hanadera Academy third-year, Yakushiji Akimitsu."

"Likewise, Yakushiji Tomomitsu."

(...)

All the Yamayurikai members gulped.

Standing up they were big enough to be mistaken for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Tower. Well, that might have been a bit of an exaggeration, but they definitely had the same intimidating atmosphere. They must have been 2 metres tall. Imposing enough to make Yumi's mind wander, with thoughts like, "School uniforms that big would have to be custom made."

"Um ... are you twins?"

Yoshino-san inquired timidly.

"That's right."

"That's right."

The same voice came from two different directions, like a stereo broadcast.

"Seems so."

It wasn't just their size that was identical. Although it would have been more surprising if they'd differed there.

Nikkou and Gakkou.

Yumi recalled that she'd met them briefly at the summer resort.

"Even though they're not twins they are quite alike."



That's what they'd said upon seeing Yumi and Yuuki together. She hadn't thought about it too deeply at the time, but they'd probably only said that because they were twins.

The introductions continued while Yumi was reeling in this memory of events that took place about a month ago.

"Second-year, Takada Magane. My hobby's body building."

"B-body building ... ?"

Sachiko-sama's face twitched slightly at this phrase that had probably never before been uttered on Lillian's grounds.

Not working out, body building. They were somewhat similar but had vastly different connotations. The nuances were kind of hard to explain, but the effect on the listener was completely different.

But Takada-kun couldn't read that mood.

"Right. My favorite foods are chicken breasts and protein."

Misinterpreting it as interest, he happily flexed his muscles.

He'd looked a bit solidly built when he was sitting down, but apparently he was quite muscly. Indeed, it had looked as though he had a couple of prize hams coming out of the sleeves of his shirts when they'd met at the end of summer. At any rate, his taut school uniform was straining to keep his body covered.

Still, it seemed unlikely that there were any men like this around Sachiko-sama. She was trying her best, but there were limits to how much Sachiko-sama could take when suddenly confronted by such an extreme "man."

"Next, Kobayashi, go."

Yuuki leaned over and spoke, having read the atmosphere.

"Ah, oh. Also second-year, Kobayashi Masamune. My best subject's math. My worst subjects are everything other than math."

"Hehe."

Sachiko-sama finally laughed. Alright, things were looking up. If the attack stays like this – . Just as Yumi was thinking this, next up was an incredibly timid boy.

"Ah, I'm Arisugawa. A second-year."

Thin with big, round eyes, he was the cute type that every boy-band had one of. Had he been there on the day of the canceled meeting? After thinking this, Yumi suddenly remembered.

Right, there. A girl in a frilly white camisole, wearing red pants and flats. Hanadera was a boys school so, umm, that meant ...

"We also have traps."

Yumi recalled the words that Kobayashi-kun had said previously. So that was what he'd meant.

Whether she was aware of this or not, at present Sachiko-sama wasn't frozen in place, nor was her expression twitching. They may have been worried about it, but at the very least it looked as though things were going better with Arisugawa-kun than with Takada-kun. Sachiko-sama probably got along worse with "manly-men" after all. Thinking about it further, Yuuki mustn't smell too manly either since he'd been accepted by Sachiko-sama.

"Also a second-year, Fukuzawa Yuuki. Thank-you for always looking after my sister."



Yuuki's self-introduction was the last from the Hanadera side.

"He really does seem similar to you, Yumi."

Yoshino-san whispered.

"Well, yeah."

Yumi said, her words intended to get Yoshino to drop the subject. Since everyone commented on the siblings being identical, their only possible response was, "Well, yeah." Besides, the self-introductions from Lillian's side were about to begin and she was completely focused on that.

It went without saying that first was – that's right, Yumi's onee-sama, Sachiko-sama.

"Lillian's High School division, third-year, Ogasawara Sachiko. My title in the Yamayurikai is Rosa Chinensis. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

They gazed spellbound on her beautiful figure and listened dreamily to her proud voice. Or so Yumi thought, but unfortunately there were those poor unfortunate souls who weren't as intoxicated by Sachiko-sama as she was.

"Yamayurikai, that's your student council, right? But that Rosa ... something, that's a bit hard to remember."

Said Kobayashi-kun, whose worst subjects were everything other than math. Sadly, the only way to know the titles of the Yamayurikai members was through rote memorization.

"There's no need for you gentleman from Hanadera to go out of your way to use those titles. Feel free to refer to me by my first or last name."

"Ah, that'll make things easier."

Sachiko-sama granted them this liberty, but if they took advantage of that and called her "Sachiko-san" or "Sachiko-chan" then this older sister would never forgive them – While Yumi was beaming this threat at Kobayashi-kun and those around him, Rei-sama stood up to take over from Sachiko-sama.

"Same, Hasekura Rei, the Rosa Foetida."

"I've heard rumors about you."

Macho-man Takada-kun said.

"What sort of rumors?"



"That you're a skilled swords-woman. Even in the Hanadera kendo club, there are those who would like to cross swords with you. They say they want to experience the purity of your head strike with their own bodies."

"Why thank-you."

Rei-sama looked conflicted as she cleared her throat and Yoshino-san turned away with a displeased expression. From this, Yumi gathered that it was also news to Yoshino-san that there were boys who wanted to be struck by Rei-sama's kendo sword.

"Second-year, Toudou Shimako. The Rosa Gigantea."

"Ah, from Shouguu temple – "

Kobayashi-kun muttered.

"Huh?"

"The chief priest visited our school to give a lecture some time ago. It was a funny speech. Everyone in the gymnasium was roaring with laughter. I only recently found out that his daughter went to Lillian's, so I was looking forward to meeting the daughter of that chief priest."

"Why tha ... I'm terribly sorry about my father."

Shimako-san went bright red as she made this cryptic remark. Still. What kind of person was Shimako-san's father, that her daughter would say this about him?

Shimako-san sat down and, for better or worse, it was Yumi's turn.

"Second-year, Fukuzawa Yumi."

Stress, stress.

"My role is Rosa Chinensis en bouton. Um."

She was wondering if she should leave it at that, but since her brother had mentioned it earlier she turned to face the boys from Hanadera and added:

"Fukuzawa Yuuki over there's my brother ... sort of."

"What do you mean, "sort of?""

Yuuki fired back from diagonally opposite. Laughter leaked out from both the Hanadera and Lillian's sides.

This wasn't good. If it kept up, it would turn into a brother and sister comedy routine.

"That's all."

She bowed and quickly sat down.

"Second-year, Rosa Foetida en bouton, Shimazu Yoshino. I'm the cousin of Hasekura Rei who introduced herself earlier."

After she'd said this, Yoshino-san glanced briefly at Yumi and grinned.

"But we're actual cousins."

Badum-tish. The room had been warmed up and then allowed to cool down for just the right amount of time so that everyone erupted in laughter.

Darn it. So then the brother/sister routine was just the warm-up act and Yoshino-san ran off with all the laughs. It wasn't as though she'd been trying for comedy, but it was a bit annoying that it looked as though she'd lost.

"First-year, Nijou Noriko. My hobby's viewing Buddhist statues."

"Buddhist statues? We have some of those at our school. You could have a look at them during our school festival."

Arisugawa-kun quietly interjected.

"We do?"

Kobayashi-kun blankly looked to Yuuki for confirmation.

"Surely you've seen them too. You know, the ones they have on stage during the Hana-matsuri celebrations."

"Ah, right, them."

Hana-matsuri was an event to celebrate Buddha's birthday, so it was similar to how Christians celebrated Christmas. Hanadera Academy was a Buddhist school after all.

"The Buddha at birth. In the Heavens and on Earth, only I am the Venerable One."

Noriko-chan posed with her right hand in the air.

"That's it!"

Takada-kun laughed.

"So you do do the rite of sprinkling the Buddha?"

"Although we use hydrangea tea rather than perfumed water. And splash it around."

What did they mean by sprinkling the Buddha with hydrangea tea? Lacking information, Yumi put her mind to work and with the phrase "splashing it around" ringing in her ears came up with a line of students passing along buckets filled with light-brown liquid (she didn't know what hydrangea tea was, so pictured it as a sort of sugary barley tea) to splash on a statue of Buddha about 160cm tall. Only later, when she got home and asked her brother for an explanation, did she learn that they actually used a ladle about 10cm long.

Apparently Hanadera Academy had more than just the Buddha at birth statues. Ones that were normally in storage, but brought out for special events. Noriko-chan became a bit interested when she heard they let outsiders view them if they followed certain procedures. She must really like those statues.

A surprisingly gentle mood had enveloped the room, due to the cheerful nature of the Hanadera gents, and the intelligence they had gathered on the Lillian's girls beforehand. Sachiko-sama had somehow managed to retain her presence of mind despite the initially off-putting smell of Takada-kun, thanks to the smooth follow-on from Yuuki and the others.

"Now then."

It was Kobayashi-kun that acted like a chairman and took control of the meeting.

"Regarding the assistance that the Lillian's ladies will provide, we'd like the three Roses to be judges and presenters for our event."

"Judges and presenters?"

Sachiko-sama looked at Rei-sama.

"The same as last year?"

The pair sought confirmation but Kobayashi-kun shook his head.

"No, this year will be different to last year's "Miss Hanadera Contest.""

Miss Hanadera Contest, he said. That was what they did last year, he said. Since she hadn't been to Hanadera Academy's school festival, Yumi turned this over in her mind. So, the previous Roses had given their all as judges of this.

– Despite being a boys school, it was "Miss Hanadera."

This part slipped through a gaping hole in Yumi's mind, but despite Lillian's being unmistakably an all-girls school, there was someone with the title of "Mister."

"How will it be different?"

Hasekura Rei-sama asked, sparkling with glory as the winner of last year's Mister Lillian competition. Kobayashi-kun pointed his finger at the ceiling and loudly announced:

"It's called, "The Hanadera War.""

"The Hanadera War?"

The Yamayurikai members, or all the females in the room, asked simultaneously.

"War ... do you mean like the Genpei War?"

Rei-sama asked, as their representative.

"That's right. The students at Hanadera high-school are split between the Genji and the Heishi clans, basically the sports clubs and the cultural clubs, and battle it out with their brains and their brawn. Well, to put it simply, they play games. They get points from the various games and whichever side gets the most points wins."

It hadn't really sunk into Yumi's brain after hearing this explanation, but the other members seemed to be looking at each other and nodding. Based on that, it looked as though they mostly understood what was being proposed.

"So what would we be doing as judges?"

This time it was Yuuki that caught Sachiko-sama's question and responded with an explanation.

"In the middle of the game is a quiz for the competitors. You'll judge which answers are correct and which are incorrect in the quiz."

"And as presenters?"

"We'd like you to present prizes to clubs and individuals. We haven't yet settled on the details, but we're thinking MVP or outstanding effort awards."

"By prizes, you mean – "

"Entry tickets to next month's Lillian's Girls Academy school festival."

"Huh?"



Yumi unthinkingly cried out after hearing what came out of her brother's mouth. Then Sachiko-sama quietly informed her:

"Don't be so loud. It's an annual tradition."

"Ah, is that so?"

For a variety of reasons, all guests had to have a ticket to get in to Lillian's school festival. Current students could get tickets for their family and friends but the numbers were limited and those with no connections couldn't get in, even if they were students at the neighboring school. As a result, the tradition was born of each Yamayurikai member taking ten tickets to the Hanadera school festival as gifts. This was probably influenced by the Hanadera school festival taking place a month before Lillian's.

"Do you understand what we're asking?"

"We agree with the general outline. Although we'll have to examine the finer details of the proposal in good time."

Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, and Shimako-san accepted the Hanadera proposal. Naturally, since the three Roses had said "Yes" the boutons weren't about to disagree.

"Were there any questions?"

"Yes."

Noriko-chan slowly raised her hand.

"Is it alright if I ask about something unrelated to the school festival?"

"Of course."

"I'm sorry, it's just a minor thing. Arisugawa-san."

"Ah, yes."

Having been singled out by name, Arisugawa-kun's shoulders jumped slightly.

"I seem to have missed your first name."

"Uh."

"So I thought I'd confirm it from this document – "

Noriko-chan looked down at the piece of paper that had been handed out earlier with the attendees names on it and continued.

"But it's not there either. I thought I should ask in case we had to contact you."

Yumi checked her copy of the printout and, like Noriko-chan had said, it just had "Arisugawa" listed there.

But it didn't look as though his name was Ari Sugawa either. Because for Yuuki, there was a one character wide gap between the words Fukuzawa and Yuuki.

"My first name?"

Yuuki let out a sigh and looked up at the ceiling, apparently troubled, while Takada-kun crossed his boneless ham arms and looked down, and Kobayashi-kun took off his glasses and wiped the lenses. The Yakushiji brothers – didn't really do anything.

"... Noriko."

Probably sensing something from the mysterious actions of the Hanadera students, Shimako-san said her petit soeur's name as a rebuke.

"I'm terribly sorry. It seems I shouldn't have asked about this."

"No, it's alright."

Arisugawa-kun lifted his gaze from the table, having gathered his resolve.

"Alice."

Yuuki said, trying to restrain him. But Arisugawa-kun continued on, ignoring the interruption.

"M-my name is Arisugawa Kintarou."

"\_"

Yumi, no not just Yumi, probably all six of the Yamayurikai representatives couldn't believe their ears.

Arisugawa Kintarou.

That was kind of –

"It seems kind of wrong, doesn't it? Everyone always laughs when I first introduce myself. So you see."

But after seeing Arisugawa-kun on the verge of tears, no-one felt like laughing.

"It's true."

Sachiko-sama silently stood up and walked around the table to Arisugawa-kun.

"... Alice."

"Huh?"

"Alice is your nickname, right? Kintarou's a fine name too, but the sound of Alice just fits you perfectly."

Then, from Arisugawa-kun:

"Sachiko-samaaa."

Of all things, he hugged Sachiko-sama and wept into her chest.

"I was born into a boy's body by mistake. I really should have been born a girl and gone to Lillian's. Then I could have been your petit soeur, and then."

"Hold on a minute!"

Yumi jumped in without thinking.

"That's just not happening. No way. Because I'm Sachiko-sama's soeur."

Even though she really did feel sorry for Arisugawa-kun's mind not matching his body. But this and that were two completely different things.

"... That's how it is. I'm sorry, Alice."

Sachiko-sama gently extricated herself from Arisugawa-kun's embrace.

"No, I should be the one apologizing."

She must have heard his voice, but Sachiko-sama remained coldly facing away from him, not turning to look back.

Or, rather, she wasn't able to turn and look back.

Sachiko-sama had completely tensed up.

She had been fine when compassion had taken her over to Arisugawa-kun's side, but then she'd been embraced in a surprise attack and now she was like an electrical appliance after the circuit breaker had cut in.

Even if she considered Arisugawa-kun's mind to be that of a girl's, his body was that of a boy's whether he liked it or not.

Still, it was impressive that Sachiko-sama had enough energy left over to separate herself from Arisugawa-kun.

Yumi took Sachiko-sama by the arm and helped her back to her seat. It probably looked as though Yumi was trying to monopolize her onee-sama, but that didn't matter. Her main priorities were protecting Sachiko-sama's pride and showing consideration for Arisugawa-kun.

"What a shame, Alice. Even if you'd gone to Lillian's, you wouldn't have been Sachiko-sama's soeur, but you might have become Yumi-chan's friend."

Kobayashi-kun patted Arisugawa-kun on the shoulder.

Feeling relieved at having returned Sachiko-sama safely to her seat, Yumi looked up when she heard this.

"My friend? If that's what you want, we could start now."

"... Mm."

"Of course, I'm not going to let you have my onee-sama."

She winked and smiled.

"I'm so happy."

Alice / Arisugawa-kun really did look happy as he clapped his hands together. And Yumi felt happy too for having brought him such joy. Like she was covering up for her onee-sama's dislike of men. Even though he was biologically male, Alice was actually a girl on the inside, so Yumi felt like she'd gained another girlfriend.

"Alice, we'd warmly welcome you as a friend too."

Rei-sama offered as well. But picturing them standing next to each other in normal clothes, it would be hard to tell who was the girl and who was the boy.

"Don't steal my Rei-chan, Alice."

Yoshino-san feigned a scowl and then smiled.

"Okay, Yoshino-san."

Alice seemed pleased, despite her angry look.

"Pleased to meet you, Alice-san."

"I know we'll get along well together, Alice."

Noriko-chan and Shimako-san also reached out to him.

"Th-thank-you, everyone."

Alice was moved to tears having been accepted by all of the Yamayurikai members. Even Sachiko-sama recovered from her shut-down enough to smile at Alice, as he was happily surrounded by everyone.

Sachiko-sama was gradually being forged through the accumulation of small shocks.

"Well, I suppose we can call the Alice matter resolved then?"



Yuuki sought confirmation, still a little bit confused. His expression saying that it just didn't make sense.

That was understandable. Since it had started with a question about Arisugawa-kun's name but had somehow ended with declarations of "Let's be friends."

"I don't mind. But doesn't it feel like Alice is getting a better deal than us somehow?"

Kobayashi-kun grumbled jealously, since his friend was the only one getting closer to the girls.

Then it was Yuuki, seated beside him, that spoke.

"Usually he gets a worse deal, so I'll let it slide."

"I guess."

"That's true."

Takada-kun also agreed. Alice could blend in very easily at an all-girls school, but he probably had trouble at an all-boys school. Even though they were all second-year high-school students, they all had their own problems.

"How about we wrap it up by saying that we're all better off getting along well with each other, regardless of what form it takes?"

At any rate, they had satisfactorily accomplished the goal for today's meeting, which was to meet face-to-face and strengthen the relationship between the two groups. The time they had available to use the library's conference room was almost up, so they decided to close the meeting with a toast of barley tea.

"Cheers."

At any rate, just as the first meeting between the representatives of Hanadera Academy and Lillian's Girls Academy was peacefully drawing to a close –

"Um."

Shimako-san spoke before she'd even put her paper cup down on the table.

"I've been considering this for a while now, but no matter how much I think about it I still can't figure it out."

The question Shimako-san had for the Hanadera students, who were just starting to get ready to leave, was simple and clear.

"Who is the Hanadera student council president?"

"Ah."

Now that it had been pointed out, Yumi suddenly realized that during the introductions they'd given their name and grade, but no-one had said anything about roles, like president, or vice-president, or secretary. Right, right, they even did the introductions in order of age. There were no descriptions in the print-out either.

Upon hearing this, Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama hastily took out the formal letter of request to assist at the Hanadera Academy school festival and looked over it.

But that only had the sender listed as "The Hanadera Academy Student Council," with no mention of the name of the student council president.

"Isn't Yakushiji-san the student council president ... ?"

Sachiko-sama said.

They were seniors and powerfully built. However. Supposing that was true, she wanted to ask Sachiko-sama, "Which one?" The Yakushiji brothers were nigh on identical, but they were still two people.

"I thought it was Kobayashi-kun since he talked the most."

Rei-sama muttered. Indeed, it had been Kobayashi-kun that had been leading the meeting a little while ago.

"Ah, I'm the treasurer."

Kobayashi-kun loved numbers. Such a fitting job for him.

"While I'm at it, Nikkou and Gakkou ... ah, the Yakushiji brothers are more like consultants or overseers. Basically, they were on the previous student council but have since retired, so their position is that of an adviser."

Now that he mentioned it, despite their powerful builds, they hadn't really stated any opinions. That was exactly the sort of thing that advisers would do.

With that, there were three candidates remaining.

Thinking about the Hanadera student council president, the first thing to come to mind was the previous one, Kashiwagi-san. But none of the three remaining, or any of the six really, matched up with the image of Kashiwagi-san.

"Shall we do it as a quiz? Or take a survey of everyone? Which one seems the most presidential?"

"Idiot, Kobayashi. You're being rude."

Yuuki scolded his friend. Then he neatly moved his arms to his side and stood up straight.

"I apologize for my incompetence. I am the current president of the Hanadera Academy high-school student council. I look forward to working with you."

After that, he bowed his head deeply.

Huh, Yuuki's the student council president.

– Wait.

"What!?"

Yumi's loud cry echoed off the meeting room ceiling.

Because.

That was – that was something she hadn't heard about before.

## Part 2.

"It's like this," her brother said.

"At Hanadera high-school, the students are traditionally split into two camps."

"Two camps?"

"Right. The hard-liners and the slackers. The sports clubs and the athletics clubs. Genji and Heishi. Red and white. No matter what you call it, in general it comes down to the dumb jocks versus the weak nerds."

It was only after they left behind the JR lines at M station and got on board their bus at the south entrance that Yuuki finally started to explain the situation to his sister.

"But there's some people that are smart and good at sports too, right?"

They chatted quietly, sitting in the double-seater two rows from the back of the bus.

"I said in general, didn't I? Mostly it's based on what club activities you do."

In that case, choosing a club was an important decision that determined how their three years of high-school would play out. Something like that could easily keep a first-year awake at night worrying about it.

"What about you, Yuuki? You didn't join any clubs, did you?"

"I didn't. That was a mistake."

"Huh?"

"It means I'm neutral. One of the requirements of being the student council president."

The students were split right in two. So the student council had to avoid any bias towards one side or the other.

"Kashiwagi-san was – "

"He was the opposite of me. He joined a lot of clubs. Participating equally in both sports and cultural activities."

Now it made sense. Just from what Yumi knew, Kashiwagi-san did kendo and the tea ceremony, and he could even dance. But from what Yuuki said, it sounded like he was also involved in a number of other clubs. On top of that he was also

smart enough to get an advance entry into Hanadera University, so he was the so-called "complete package." A super-man that could do anything.

"But there must be others besides you, right? Students not in a club, I mean."

Even if most of the students split into one of two groups, it seemed natural that some would choose neither.

"Only a few."

Yuuki's response indicated there were some.

"So it didn't absolutely have to be you then."

"Kashiwagi-sempai nominated me. A parting gift from him."

"It's decided by who the president nominates as their successor!?"

"Come off it. There's an election. It'd be the same with you, right Yumi?"

"Yeah, more or less."

In the case of Lillian's Girls Academy, the probability of the boutons being elevated to Roses was incredibly high. But even so, they still had the student council elections every year. That's right – this year they had someone other than the boutons nominate themselves, which caused quite an uproar.

"Although in my case, there were no other candidates."

Yuuki laughed self-deprecatingly.

The vice-president, Takada-kun, was with a sports club, the secretary, Alice, a cultural club, and the treasurer, Kobayashi-kun, was unaffiliated with any clubs just like Yuuki, which left the current student council in a pretty good state. They'd all probably been designated for those roles by the previous student council.

"Well, that's how it is, so we'll see how it goes."

As the bus reached their stop, Yuuki closed off their conversation and stood up.

"See how it goes, huh. Hold on a minute."

Yumi picked up her bag and followed her brother down the steps.

"Why did you hide this from me until now?"

She asked Yuuki's back once they were off the bus.

"I wasn't hiding it. I just didn't say anything."

Yuuki waited until Yumi caught up then resumed walking slowly. After they'd got off, the bus waited for some other passengers to get on before taking off and disappearing into the distance.

"It's the same thing. A while back, I asked you what sort of person the current Hanadera student president was. You dodged the question back then."

By saying something like, "You'll find out soon enough."

She'd been worried that the president might have been bullying Yuuki. Or making eyes at him.

When all the time, he'd been the student council president. Geez, what a fool she'd been.

"You couldn't tell your sister something that important? How pathetic am I? Do you even know what this feels like?"

Yuuki stopped when he heard Yumi's words.

"For that, I'm sorry. I knew it was wrong of me."

Like a wilting flower, Yuuki lowered his head. Yumi wouldn't criticize him any more, since she could tell he must have thought about it deeply.

"Why couldn't you just tell me from the start?"

"I couldn't tell you because you're my real sister. Because it's kind of pathetic, don't you think? I'm simply a figurehead, a president that's like a regular worker with no real power."

"Oh, really?"

"Does it look like I have any power?"

"It doesn't... you're right."

Yumi answered, after thinking back on the actions of the Hanadera members during their visit to Lillian's Girls Academy today.

"You didn't have to say it."

Yuuki smiled bitterly, then once again started to walk ahead of her.

As she watched her brother's back, Yumi thought, "But even so, if I was asked who other than Yuuki acted most presidential, there isn't a single person I would pick out as being the one."

"So tell me, Yuuki – "

"Mm?"

"Do you want to be like Kashiwagi-san?"

"Huh?"

Yuuki turned around and looked back at her with a deer in the headlights expression.

"You don't have to force it. What's wrong with being a student council president with no power? It doesn't really seem fitting for commoners like us to have power."

She didn't know under what circumstances Kashiwagi-san had nominated Yuuki, but she chose to interpret it as a vote of confidence in him. He should be proud of that.

The other students certainly wouldn't have wanted a copy of Kashiwagi Suguru. That's why they chose someone life-sized like Fukuzawa Yuuki.

Like with the play for last year's school festival, Yumi couldn't have played the same sort of Cinderella as Sachiko-sama. And Sachiko-sama couldn't play Yumi's Cinderella. It was probably something like that.

"... Really? You might be student council president some day too, Yumi."

"Maybe, but."

Before that, there was the election. Yumi didn't know whether or not she'd get the same vote of support as Yuuki.

There was no point in rushing that, it was still many months away. Either that, or she was determined to let nature take its course. Yumi herself didn't know. Maybe she'd be more excited when the time actually came.

They walked side-by-side in silence for a little while. Passing various houses on the left and right.





Big house, small house.

Weird house, house that looks like triplets.

Behind the hedges of one house, a fatherly looking man watered the garden plants with a hose. There was still the lingering scent of summer there.

Eventually their home appeared.

Their beloved home that their dad had designed. But despite this, someone else looking at it might see it as just another ordinary house.

"Yumi."

Yuuki said as they approached the entry together.

"Hm?"

What was he going to say?

"You've got strong."

But.

"Yeah right."

Yumi smiled, thinking it was some kind of joke, but Yuuki was completely serious as he continued.

"I feel kinda rushed."

Then he jogged off, through the front door and into the house, as though he didn't want to get left behind.

"What was that about?"

Why did he have to hurry?

Yuuki may not think it but she was his older sister, sort of. Yumi mumbled this to herself before the smell of dinner drew her into their home.

# That's a Problem

## Part 1.

"Your younger brother's jealous of you, Yumi-sama. Definitely."

The girl said as she gathered trash from the floor into a dustpan.

"Jealous?"

Normally someone as tall as her, 179cm, wouldn't be labeled a "girl" but she was actually only 15 years old. A high-school first-year, one year below Yumi.

"Having such a completely flawless and perfect older sister, who's wise, cute and has a bubbly personality, the only way he could preserve himself would be to thoroughly bully you, raise the white flag and become your servant, or completely deny your existence itself."

"P-perfect older sister? Kanako-chan."

What a joke. Yumi had stopped wiping the tables and was getting to ready to laugh, but –

"The best thing about you, Yumi-sama, is that you don't realize what a wonderful girl you are."

Kanako-san said with a straight face. It seems she didn't consider that earlier "joke" to be a joke at all.

"You're always so modest, Yumi-sama."

The younger girl mumbled, her eyes sparkling.

It was after school and, for now, it was just Yumi and her on the second-floor of the Rose Mansion.

So there was no-one there to back her up.

But, ah.

How on earth was she supposed to react to this room filled with an atmosphere of sparkling adoration?

"Um."

Never before in her life had Yumi been complimented like this by a younger girl. Basically, she had no previous data samples to draw on, so she had absolutely no idea how she was supposed to react to this situation.

"Ah, oh, right."

It seemed awkward to remain silent, so she decided to say something.

"I'm sorry you got dragged in to helping clean the Rose Mansion. You shouldn't have to worry about it, since we're the ones that use it, we should be able to keep it clean."

"It's fine."

Kanako-chan ran a hand through her long hair and smiled.

"I only came to help because Noriko-chan has outside cleaning duty this week, so I thought she might be late getting to the Rose Mansion. Which seems to be the case since you were the first to arrive, Yumi-sama. I was hoping that I'd get to enjoy some time with you. Ah, I'll get that."

As she said this, Kanako-chan nimbly plucked the dishrag from Yumi's hands.

"Ah."

"You shouldn't concern yourself with this sort of thing, Yumi-sama."

The dishrag was rinsed in the sink, wrung out to dry, then banished to a corner of the bench.

"You know, Kanako-chan."

If wiping the table clean was something she considered beneath herself, then just what type of cleaning would she ever do? In truth, Yumi had been cleaning the school restrooms before she came here, but saying that would be a bit too brutally honest. Especially since she'd been in charge of cleaning the toilet bowls.

"It's only because of a lack of first-years that you have to do this hard work, Yumi-sama. Rosa Foetida en bouton really should hurry up and get a petit soeur."

"..."

Kanako-chan said something that would undoubtedly have Yoshino-san scowling in anger if she heard it.

In that case, Yumi herself should get a petit soeur. She was about to rebuke Kanako-chan, but that girl's eyes were off looking at a different dimension.

"Oh, Kanako-chan, you're here."

"Ah, gokigenyou, Rosa Foetida."

It was only after the biscuit door opened and Rosa Foetida entered the room that Kanako-chan finally returned to this dimension.

Yumi breathed a sigh of relief. There was someone else besides just herself and Kanako-chan. At the very least, the atmosphere of sparkling adoration should dissipate.

"Thanks for your continued assistance."

Rei-sama set her bag down on one of the seats then flopped down in the chair next to it.

"Not at all, I only just got here. Yumi-sama had finished most of the cleaning by the time I arrived."

"Oh, really?"

A glance. Rei-sama looked away from both Yumi and Kanako-chan and smiled.

"Would you like some barley tea, Rosa Foetida?"

"Ah, thank-you."

"I'll pour some for you too, Yumi-sama."

"Th-thanks."

Already well practiced in this, Kanako-chan took the glass jug out of the refrigerator and poured some of the cool barley tea into glasses that had been standing upside-down in the dish rack.

"Um, Rei-sama."

Yumi whispered while Kanako-chan was looking the other way.

"About the cleaning, I wasn't really involved ... "

"I know that. But it's fine. She's valiantly helping out for your sake, Yumi-chan. With everyone running around busy with the school festival, it's hard to find someone who's willing to help out without some form of compensation. It'd be kind of sad to pour cold water on her good mood."

"Hah."

Well, apart from the excessive compliments there was no real harm for now. In reality, she was a huge help.

But still Yumi had her doubts. Was it alright to be taking advantage of her like this?

They were grateful for her volunteer work, but was this the sort of thing they should be accepting volunteers for?

"Well, I'll be leaving now."

Kanako-chan placed the two glasses of barley tea on the table and bowed quickly.

"Ah, thank-you."

"Not at all. Until next time."

After she disappeared beyond the biscuit door, the sounds of her going down the stairs and the faint sound of the Rose Mansion's front door being opened and closed were carried to Yumi's ears.

Alright then. As she reached out a hand towards a glass of barley tea, Rei-sama smiled.

"What's the matter, Yumi-chan?"

"Huh?"

"You were sighing."

"Uh."

"It was an incredibly large sigh too."

"R-really?"

It was only when it was pointed out that she became aware of it, but that was certainly the sort of mood she was in – sigh.

"Deep with meaning."

"As if."

But maybe she had been a bit tense being in front of Kanako-chan. After all, wasn't it only human nature to not want to show any eccentricities to someone who admired you, leading to a subconscious stress.

## Part 2.

"Still, I guess that means Yumi-chan's got a certain dignity about her too. Since she's got an obsessed first-year fan stalking her like a courtier."

Rei-sama said as she stamped entry tickets to the Lillian's Girls Academy school festival with the Yamayurikai seal.

"What are you talking about?"

Sachiko-sama raised her head, her hands stopping their count of the tickets.

"Oh, you haven't noticed yet, Sachiko? She's been coming around every so often since the start of second semester. Her sights are obviously set on Yumi-chan."

Flattening the tickets.

They'd been working for about thirty minutes and Rei-sama may have casually started this conversation because she was getting bored from the monotony of their task.

Working the stamp was a mechanical action so she could easily talk while doing it. But it was a bit unfair to those who had to use their minds for their work.

"No way, she doesn't have her sights set on me."

Thump thump. Yumi humbly demurred as she worked the numbering stamp.

Stamping the serial number on the entrance tickets was also a monotonous job, but she still had to check that the numbers stamped were consecutive. It wasn't a job that lent itself to talking, nor was it one that precluded talking, it was halfway between the two.

"Ah, I know, the tall girl with the bizarrely long hair – "

Sachiko-sama's twirled her non-slip gel covered finger in the air.

But still, calling it "bizarrely long." Even though she'd made this remark, no-one would ever accuse Sachiko-sama of having short hair.

"Right, right."

Rei-sama gesticulated with the stamp. Kanako-chan's most distinctive physical features were her height and the length of her hair.

"I saw her talking to Yumi in the hallway once. But she left when I approached."

"I don't think she was running away because she saw you, onee-sama."

They'd probably just spotted each other walking down the hallway and stopped to chat. But without anything substantial to talk about, they would have soon parted ways, each heading towards their original destination. It had probably been something like that.

"You didn't scare her off with a furious scowl, Sachiko?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Jealousy of this mysterious younger student who was chatting casually with your cute Yumi-chan."

"That's ridiculous, please give it a rest."

Sachiko-sama scowled at Rei-sama, her cheeks puffed out a bit. Yumi thought, "Oh, cute." Although it felt terribly impolite to see her onee-sama like this.

"But, ah right, she's a first-year?"

Sachiko-sama exhaled deeply, almost like she was sighing.

"Now that you mention it, Kanako-san doesn't stop by that often when Rosa Chinensis is here."

Noriko-chan was piling up the tickets after checking that the quick-drying ink from the Yamayurikai stamp had completely dried.

"Well, I haven't really seen much of her either. You think she's targeting times when Yumi-san's here alone?"

Yoshino-san was putting the tickets into bags for each class.

"Yeah right."

Yumi laughed. She'd stopped stamping serial numbers on tickets, resigned to joining in the conversation.

"Is she a friend of yours, Noriko?"

Shimako-san asked, having listened in silence thus far.

"I wouldn't really call her a friend. She's a classmate."

So just where was the boundary between classmate and friend?

"Tell me everything you know."

It was Sachiko-sama that said this. So Noriko-chan temporarily set the entry tickets she was holding down on the table and started giving her report on Kanako-chan.

"First-year camellia class, Hosokawa Kanako-san. She doesn't stand out as much in class as her appearance would suggest. She checked out a couple of cultural clubs during the trial period at the beginning of the year, but I don't think she's joined any of them. She doesn't really associate with any particular group and mostly spends her spare time alone. I guess she comes off as a bit of a lone wolf."

As she was listening to Noriko-chan, Yumi found herself thinking, "That doesn't really match my image of Kanako-chan," throughout the entire report.

In Yumi's eyes Kanako-chan was an amiable, cheerful and sensible girl, which was a completely different impression to what Noriko-chan had.

"A lone wolf? Isn't that somewhat like you, Noriko-chan?"

Yoshino-san said mercilessly, although it was probably pertinent. Still, Kanako-chan must be really bad at getting along with her classmates for the somewhat cold and standoffish Noriko-chan to label her as such.

"Have you tried talking to her, Noriko?"

Noriko-chan shook her head at Shimako-san's question.

"We can have a business-like conversation, but a general chat goes nowhere. She seems to have an aura about her that makes it hard to talk to her. She seems to be aware of this, but isn't concerned by it."

"What about Touko-chan? She seems to like to meddle."

Noriko-chan had been annoyed by how much Touko-chan followed her around, but Touko-chan had eventually achieved a spot as one of Noriko-chan's friends and was a fellow member of the first-year camellia class.

"It's hopeless. They're like natural enemies."

"Natural enemies, huh."

Well, it was because Touko-chan had a strong personality too. Everyone seemed to more or less accept the "natural enemies" comment.

"So, what are you going to do, Yumi-chan?"



Rei-sama asked, resuming stamping the tickets as though she'd only just remembered.

"A-about what?"

"Her. Are you interested in her as your soeur? Or not?"

"My soeur?"

Yumi was pressed for an answer, but she didn't really know because she'd never looked at Kanako-chan in that light.

Yumi thought Kanako-chan was a nice girl. And that she would be able to handle the Yamayurikai work. But it was a bit too simplistic to become soeurs just because of that.

Would her relationship with Kanako-chan form like the one she had with Sachiko-sama? Or would their feelings for each other gradually grow if they became soeurs?

No, perhaps it would be a mistake to go into it with those sort of expectations. Maybe she should think about a soeur from a more practical standpoint. – While Yumi was still considering all these things, Yoshino-san spoke up.

"I'm against it. I don't think that girl matches Yumi-san at all."

"What, in terms of height?"

The short grande soeur and the tall petit soeur. Their standing and their stature were inversely proportional, making them uneven reverse soeurs.

"Well there's that, but I just don't get a good feeling from her. The way she coils around you, saying, "Yumi-sama, Yumi-sama.""

She just doesn't get a good feeling. A completely subjective opinion. But just as Yumi was starting to read too much into it and get depressed she was saved by a flash of insight into Yoshino-san's words.

"Aren't you just being jealous, Yoshino? It feels like you're annoyed that Yumi-chan might be getting a petit soeur before you."

"You're wrong. Ahh, geez Rei-cha ... ah, onee-sama, you're too simple."

"I wonder ... it's always suspicious when you turn serious."

Rei-sama kept on teasing her.

"But if Yumi-san had a petit soeur then life would be easier for Yoshino-san, so would she really oppose it just out of jealousy?"

Shimako-san coolly analyzed the feverish Yoshino-san.

Indeed, there seemed to have been whisperings about the "petit soeur problem" around the place recently. During first semester, most of the talk had been about Nijou Noriko-chan becoming Rosa Gigantea en bouton, but now that she'd settled in to that role everyone was starting to ask for new stories. Last year there had been two sets of soeurs formed during the time between the start of second semester and the school festival, so perhaps that led to some high expectations for this year too.

The school festival, one year ago.

Yumi glanced at Sachiko-sama. Their eyes met and Yumi's onee-sama smiled, looking triumphant.

"Well? Do you understand how I was feeling last year?"

"How could I? I didn't even know you this time last year."

Besides, Yumi hadn't looked at Sachiko-sama's face because she wanted that sort of comment. Why had she looked in that direction? It hadn't been conveyed all that well.

"Still, they have a point. It doesn't matter if it's Yoshino or Yumi-chan, but if neither of you find a petit soeur soon we'll be in a bit of a bind."

Rei-sama tapped her own shoulders.

"That's true. Feel free to lay our fears to rest at any time now."

Sachiko-sama murmured like a retiree.

"The more you talk about it, the more it seems like a demand."

Noriko-chan's sharp observation cut through.

"That's not it at all."

"Right."

They looked at each other and denied it. Still, now that it had been brought up, Yumi and Yoshino-san both felt they were being obligated to do so by their onee-samas.

"To start off with, what brought you and that girl together, Yumi?"

"It was."

Yumi folded her arms in front of her chest and went, "Hmm."

"What was it again? I can't remember at all."

"Huh?"

"It's like she just showed up at some point."

It wasn't like she'd fixed her tie or they'd met beneath the falling cherry blossoms. And, naturally, they weren't real-life relatives.

"Yumi. Showing signs of dementia at your age ... "

Sachiko-sama looked sympathetically at Yumi. However.

Did her onee-sama really have the right to say that?

Why? Because Sachiko-sama had completely and utterly forgotten about their first meeting by the time of their second one.

(... Huh?)

Just now, those words were tugging at something.

(Um.)

Right. She'd remembered a keyword that had briefly touched upon something in her mind.

– Completely and utterly forgotten.

(Forgotten. Speaking of forgotten – )

"Ah!?"

Yumi shouted and jumped out of her chair.

"What is it, Yumi?"

"I have to return a book today. I've got to go to the library, what should I do?"

She looked at her watch. 4:30pm. What time did the library close today?

"It's alright. Why don't we call it a day?"

Sachiko-sama shrugged and Rei-sama concurred. To be fair, everyone had stopped working some time ago now.

"Yumi, we're fine here so you should go to the library."

At Sachiko-sama's urging, she hastily picked up her bag.

"You go with her, Yoshino."

Rei-sama said.

"What about you, onee-sama?"

Yoshino-san asked back, filled with doubt.

"I'll head out as soon as we're finished cleaning. I'll probably meet you on the way."

Yumi had no idea why Rei-sama had suddenly said this. The library was right next to the school buildings, so it wasn't that far away or in a dangerous place. It was still light out, so there was no real reason why she couldn't go alone.

"You shouldn't do the cleaning Rosa Foetida, I'll do it."

Noriko-chan offered, but Rei-sama smiled and waved her away.

"It's fine, you go."

"You can leave it to us from time to time. Right, Noriko-chan, Shimako, you two can head home early today too."

With the two third-years taking charge like that, the first-year couldn't refuse.

"Huh."

The end result was that Yumi left with Yoshino-san in tow, then the White Rose soeurs exited the Rose Mansion as though they were chasing after them.

## Part 3.

"Those two are plotting something, don't you think?"

Yoshino-san said, coming to a stop at the library entrance.

"Plotting something?"

Yumi looked back over her shoulder at the Rose Mansion which they'd just recently left.

"It was like they were forcing us out. Telling us to accompany you. Why would they have something that they had to discuss today?"

"You're right, it is a bit unusual for just the third-years to be tidying up."

Shimako-san looked puzzled too.

Especially since the petit soeurs were there to do those sort of odd jobs for the Yamayurikai. Not counting Yumi, who had to hurry to the library, there was no reason for Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan to leave early. If they wanted to have a discussion with just the Roses, then Shimako-san, as Rosa Gigantea, should have been asked to stay as well.

"Do you think it's about the play for the school festival?"

Noriko-chan mumbled quietly.

"I thought as much."

They hadn't said anything, but the three second-years had been thinking the same thing.

"I heard Rei-chan and Sachiko-sama talking about commissioning something from the handicraft club and the art club the other day. Do you want to try hitting them up for some info?"

Yoshino-san was always racing off and it was usually Yumi's job to apply the breaks.

"... Let's not. If there's something they don't want us to know, we shouldn't be trying to uncover it."

"I guess."

Yoshino-san gave up on the idea surprisingly easily. Perhaps she reconsidered whether hitting someone up was appropriate behavior for a Yamayurikai member.

"Have you heard anything, Shimako-san?"

"Unfortunately, no. I don't think it means we're on the outer, but I did think that perhaps if we found out too early we would refuse."

Like something that was announced at the last moment so they couldn't run away. Or where the preparations were already done, so they should just give up. That was the same sort of thing that happened with last year's Cinderella.

"What terrible things will they make us do!?"

Yoshino-san pressed Shimako-san with a terrible looking face.

The man-hating Sachiko-sama was made to dance with a man. What sort of punishment could rival that – no, not a punishment, it was supposed to be a play after all.

"I told you, I don't know. Really."

Yumi felt like she had just glimpsed one of the reasons that Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama hadn't told Shimako-san. They may have had well-founded fears that Yoshino-san would force Shimako-san to spill the beans. Of course she wasn't about to mention this because they'd both be offended.

"At any rate, what on earth do you think they'll make us do?"

"Who knows."

The three second-years stood there and pondered this for a while. Then Noriko-chan looked incredulous as she made a proposal:

"Yumi-sama. Why don't you return your book before you start worrying about this?"

"Ah, right."

So with that, they decided to relocate inside the library.

Luckily, the reading room was still open and the library assistants were still processing loans and returns. There were quite a few people like Yumi rushing in at the last minute.

"This doesn't seem like your kind of book, Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san said, spotting the book Yumi had placed on the counter.

"My onee-sama recommended it to me."

"I see."

It was the anthology of classical Japanese literature that Sachiko-sama had been returning on the library open day during the summer vacation, which she'd handed over to Yumi to borrow. It had taken a while for her to begin reading it, but with the due date looming she'd made a start and got caught up in what was a surprisingly enjoyable read. Naturally she hadn't read the original versions written in ancient Japanese, but the modern translations on the bottom half of the page.

After completing the process of returning the book, the library assistant asked:

"Were there any books you wanted to borrow?"

"No."

Yumi shook her head and put away her library card, but then Noriko-chan poked her head forwards and said:

"Um, if no-one's placed a hold on that book, I'd like to borrow it."

"This book?"

The library assistant asked, pointing at the book that Yumi had just placed on the counter.

"Yes, that one."

"I don't think there's a hold on it ... "

She tapped away on the keyboard to confirm it, but even without that it was obvious that nobody would be borrowing an anthology of classical literature, except in the lead up to exams or before a report was due. It didn't have the same level of popularity as the novels listed on the whiteboard next to the counter with "Current wait list: 20 people."

"But, you know, this book doesn't have any stories about Buddhist statues, so are you sure you want to borrow it?"





"Um, there's more to my life than just that, you know?"

"Well sure. Come on Yumi-san, not even Noriko-chan's bookshelves would be full of books about Buddhist statues."

"... No, that's actually pretty accurate."

Noriko-chan laughed. With the words echoing around the reading room, what else could she do but laugh at her book collection.

"My apologies."

Yumi and Yoshino-san both bowed simultaneously.

"Don't worry about it. I'm used to it."

She was used to it. Apparently she'd had all sorts of problems due to having a hobby that didn't really match her age.

"Um, so what did you want to do with this book?"

The library assistant timidly inquired. She'd confirmed that no-one had a hold on it and was about to lend it out when Yumi had started the conversation with, "Are you sure?" so had probably been waiting for their conversation to end to confirm this.

"Ah, I'll borrow it."

Noriko-chan presented her library card and the book was handed over to her, so a happy ending all around ... or so they thought, but:

"Oh my, that looks interesting. I wonder if I could borrow it after Noriko."

This time it was Shimako-san making a reservation after seeing the book her petit soeur was carrying, so naturally the library assistant was perplexed.

Had that book ever been so popular before? And with the student council leaders no less. No, it hadn't. Probably.

"Um, is this year's Yamayurikai play going to be something like Princess Kaguya, by any chance?"

Was the sparkly-eyed library assistant perhaps a fan of mystery novels?

Like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot or Kogoro Akechi and Kosuke Kindaichi.

Unfortunately, however, Yumi had to refute her deduction. Although they didn't know for sure what this year's Yamayurikai play was going to be, they could

say for certain that it wasn't going to be Princess Kaguya. Why? Because the book did not contain The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter.

"That's a shame."

Still, it was fascinating how much speculation was generated by Sachiko-sama borrowing a single book over the summer vacation.

"Shimako-san was sticking up for me though."

Yoshino-san said, sighing.

The group of four had left the library, walked for a little while, stopped and prayed together in front of the statue of Maria-sama and were just about to start walking again.

"Sticking up for you?"

"Yeah. In the Rose Mansion."

The Rose Mansion. In other words, Yoshino-san was reopening a conversation from quite some time ago without any introduction.

"I really was jealous. Probably."

Upon hearing this, Yumi finally understood. She was referring to her objection of Yumi having Kanako-chan as a soeur.

"Shimako-san got Noriko-chan as a soeur and now it's Yumi-san's turn ... on reflection, I probably am bitter. No, I guess it's something more like loneliness. Like I'm getting left behind, in a way."

"... Yoshino-san."

"Having said that, it feels like I've got to move in that direction too and find a petit soeur of my own. Know what I mean?"

"Mm."

Yumi nodded and Yoshino-san turned her head to look straight at her.

"Mm, you say. Do you really understand?"

Yoshino-san's face saying that she wouldn't forgive her if she was just being agreeable.

"Let's just say I understand what you're trying to say, in general. Because I feel the same way too. From time to time."

"Hmm."

Yoshino-san looked a bit pleased as she walked along.

Even though she knew it was impossible, she wanted things to stay like this forever.

Even though in her head she knew she should catch up to her friends and walk alongside them instead of standing and watching them leave. Leaving that place under her own power was scary.

She didn't want things to change.

But having taken a step forwards, she'd definitely changed in some way from before she took that step.

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan were listening in silence. They probably understood what Yoshino-san was trying to say and what Yumi was feeling. But they weren't about to presume to say that either. Yumi liked that about those two.

"A petit soeur ... it's a problem."

Yoshino-san stretched her arms.

"Really, I wonder what I should do."

Yumi wasn't about to give up either so she thrust her hand carrying her bag forwards and gave a cheer.

"That girl, Kanako-chan. Do you think she really was looking to become your petit soeur, Yumi-san?"

"I wonder about that."

Thinking about it in general, that possibility certainly existed. Or, rather, it was easy to understand why someone would think that.

"So what do you think you'll do?"

"I don't know."

Even if Kanako-chan hoped to become the petit soeur of Rosa Chinensis en bouton, that by itself didn't mean they had to become soeurs.

"If you're not interested in her as a petit soeur, wouldn't you be better off telling her that directly?"

Shimako-san agreed with Yoshino-san's opinion, saying, "That's right."

"If she's helping out because she wants to be Yumi-san's petit soeur, don't you think her expectations will grow as time goes on? Everyone around you may start to see it that way too. Turning her down after it got to that point would be bad for both of you."

There was some weight to Shimako-san's words, since she hadn't been anyone's petit soeur when she first helped out at the Rose Mansion.

"But Kanako-chan's never said a word about wanting to be my petit soeur. Don't you think it'd be strange to go ahead and turn her down?"

"Well, that's true."

Yoshino-san shrugged. However.

"You don't have to force yourself to turn her down. You might want her as your petit soeur."

Shimako-san said gently, like she was giving detailed instructions to a child, while Yoshino-san spoke in a comparatively forceful manner.

"But won't that be setting a bad precedent?"

"A bad precedent? How?"

Yumi asked and Yoshino-san excitedly raised her index finger in the air.

"If you set the precedent of taking an uninvited stalker as your petit soeur, it'll cause problems for those that come later."

"Problems later ... I see."

Yoshino-san was obviously worried about herself.

The straight path lined with ginkgo trees.

It was less than an hour since it would have been swept during cleaning time, but every so often then there were unripe ginkgo nuts that had fallen from the trees.

The ginkgo trees were so tall that human hands couldn't even reach the lowest branch.

Perhaps some large birds, like crows, had mischievously shaken the branches. Maybe they'd been brought there by the wind.

Noriko-chan suddenly came to a stop and mumbled.

"Speaking of uninvited stalkers – "

"Huh?"

Was the simultaneous response from the other three.

"There's another one over there."

Noriko-chan's outstretched finger pointed straight at the front gate, towards the figures of Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama who had arrived some time ago. And then.

"Ah, Yumi-sa~n."

A boy poked his head around the two Roses. He was immediately recognizable.

"You made it."

The way he was happily waving his hand above his shoulder was cute. Undoubtedly cute, but.

Yumi was totally perplexed, as though she needed to squat down to recover her bearings.

– Doing that while wearing a boy's school uniform just ruins the effect completely, Alice.

# Setting Aside the "Bread Incident"

## Part 1.

Lunchtime.

As she was hurrying to Milk Hall to buy a pastry, Yumi spotted someone she knew from behind and instinctively called out to her.

"Touko-cha~n."

With her characteristic hairstyle, two ringlets – one on the left and one on the right, there was no mistaking her for someone else. As expected, when her name was called she slowed down and turned around.

"... Yumi-sama."

"Are you by yourself?"

Yumi jogged through the crowd of people to stand beside her. The somewhat stubborn girl, one grade below her.

"Is there something wrong with being by myself? But since you mentioned it, Yumi-sama, you don't seem to have any companions with you either."

Prickly Touko-chan.

Yumi hadn't been trying to say that there was anything wrong with being alone, but ... well, Touko-chan usually had a sharp tongue.

Still, Yumi thought that she was inoculated against it now, as opposed to when they'd first met. Maybe she was used to it, or maybe she just thought Touko-chan was cute, like a menacing kitten.

"Well, today, my mom forgot to set the timer for the rice cooker and we didn't have any rice. So I have to buy something from Milk Hall, since all I've got in my lunchbox is side dishes."

Yumi held out the bag holding the small plastic container.

"I didn't really need to hear about that."

"Really? You mean you weren't thinking, "Yumi-sama always brings a lunchbox, so why's she going to Milk Hall?""

"How conceited. The world doesn't revolve around you, Yumi-sama."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. Well then, goodbye."

Intending those as parting words, Touko-chan hurried off. Yumi hurried after her, having more or less anticipated that reaction.

This path led to various other places, like the school store and the chapel, but at this time of day she was probably heading to Milk Hall too. Yumi didn't really want to walk the rest of the way to their destination looking at Touko-chan's back.

"Touko-chan's being so cold. Makes Yumi so lone~ly."

Clinging on to Touko-chan.

"Please stop."

Touko-chan took half a step sideways to put some space between them. But that was all she did, perhaps having lost her earlier desire to shake off Yumi. Maybe she'd given up, seeing that running away was pointless.

"How come you haven't visited the Rose Mansion recently?"

Yumi asked as they walked side-by-side.

"I've been busy with club activities. Besides."

Touko-chan looked down.

"It's filled with an evil presence."

"An evil presence?"

Yumi asked and Touko-chan raised her head, surprised.

"Please ignore that last part. It's my problem to deal with."

Ignore it or not, it was a cryptic remark. Without clarification, Yumi had no idea what it meant.

"Are things like evil presences popular at the moment?"

"What do you mean, popular?"

This time it was Touko-chan asking for clarification.

"There was something I heard from my brother."

"Your brother? – Ah."

"Oh, that's right, you've met my brother."

Boy meets girl at Kashiwagi Suguru-san's mansion. Well, let's just set that aside for now.

"The other day, one of my brother's friends was walking down the road when he got this really bad feeling. Like he was being haunted by something."

"In that case, couldn't he just pray or have an exorcism? That's a different sort of evil presence to mine."

"That's like what my brother's friend said."

"But just now you said it was like he was being haunted by something."

"That's what I said, but."

Yumi agreed. It was like he was being haunted by something but not by an actual ghost.

"They have a strong sense for the supernatural so they knew it wasn't a spirit. It was something more troublesome than that, a live human being."

Touko-chan listened silently then after a little while mumbled something that seemed to indicate she understood.

"More troublesome because it's a human ... it really is like that."

Maybe something came to mind for her too.

"You should come and visit us every so often. Sachiko-sama would be happy to see you too. If I make things too gloomy, you can pick a time when I'm not there."

Touko-chan made no response to this comment.

Arriving at Milk Hall, it was as packed full of middle and high school students as she'd expected it to be.

Touko-chan bought a strawberry milk from the vending machine by the door, then spoke to Yumi who was waiting by her side.

"Aren't you misunderstanding something?"

Like the sounds the coins made as they dropped into the change slot, she spoke in a way that seemed to say, "You'd better not forget this."

"Misunderstanding?"

"You're not the one I can't stand, Yumi-sama."

"Oh, then who?"

As she asked this, Yumi thought, "Darn it."



She'd be better off not poking her nose into matters of "Who likes who" or "Who hates who." With those sorts of interpersonal problems, if she knew both of the people she'd be reminded of it every time she saw one of them.

"Um, Touko-chan."

Yumi thought she should take back her earlier remark, or Touko-chan could help her out by hesitating to speak.

However, Touko-chan immediately opened her mouth.

"Hosokawa Kanako."

She spoke clearly, so there was no chance of mishearing her. As expected of the self-proclaimed actress. Displaying the results of her daily vocal training.

"I cannot bring myself to like her."

Touko-chan didn't just blurt out her name, but also added, "I cannot bring myself to like her," to be doubly sure. She'd heard them described as natural enemies but it was still a bit confronting to hear this first-hand. Since Yumi considered both Touko-chan and Kanako-chan to be cute juniors.

"Still, I'm not going to stop you from being her friend, nor will I criticize you for this, Yumi-sama. It's just – "

At this point, Touko-chan swallowed her words.

"It's just?"

Yumi was pressing her to continue, but Touko-chan glanced at the pastry counter and smirked.

"You should watch out, Yumi-sama. If you don't hurry, they'll be sold out."

"Ahh."

People that had arrived after her had passed Yumi and were swarming around the counter. There was already a pile of empty plastic containers behind the counter.

"You should have put in an order with whoever was on duty."

Judging by her leisurely smile, Touko-chan had only come to Milk Hall to buy a strawberry milk.

"I completely forgot about that, since I usually bring my lunch."

Apparently her mother's careless mistake was contagious.

"See you later, Touko-chan."

Yumi threw herself into the crowd of students, in order to buy a bread roll.

"Best of luck."

Touko-chan waved and smiled.

## Part 2.

The people swarming around the bread counter were more fierce than she expected. No, let's rephrase that as "full of energy."

This was Lillian's Girls Academy. There were only dignified young ladies here.

"Well, this looks tough."

There were a number of people selling the pastries so even if they were to form something like a line, it wouldn't just be one line, and the lines would just collapse when the person up front looked at what was available on the table and made their decision, and on top of that the next person in line would just order while the head of the line was making up their mind, which would lead to a sense of, "What's the point in having a line if no-one knows where the head is."

To make matters worse, for someone who wasn't used to it, moving through the crowd was surprisingly difficult. Yumi probably wasn't just imagining that she hadn't progressed forwards in quite some time.

While she was in that situation:

Tap tap.

In the confusing crush of people, someone casually strolled up behind Yumi and tapped her on the shoulder.

Wondering who on earth it was, Yumi turned around and saw a tall girl smiling at her.

"... Kanako-chan."

"What's going on here? You always bring your lunch and eat it at the Rose Mansion, so why are you in this crowd of people buying food, Yumi-sama? At first I thought I'd mistaken someone else for you."

"Well, we didn't have rice this morning."

Like Touko-chan had said, no-one would be interested in the details surrounding the Fukuzawa family's rice situation. But since she'd asked, it was fine to answer.

"My, that's quite a bother. What sort of pastries do you like, Yumi-sama?"

"Well, anything really."

The pastries for sale at Milk Hall during lunch time were whatever was left over after the orders for each class had been fulfilled. Since she didn't know what they'd have on offer, she'd come here without thinking about what she wanted to get. And in amongst this chaos it was impossible to say what type of bread she liked. Anything would do. As long as she could get one, she'd be most satisfied.

"Then I'll buy you something suitable."

After informing Yumi of this, and without any sort of go-ahead, Kanako-chan turned to the right and entered the fray of people looking to buy pastries.

"Ah, Kanako-chan."

"Just wait over to the side there, Yumi-sama."

With her height, she stood out among the crowd. She moved forwards, not so much slipping through the crowd as surging through it.

"You don't have to overdo it. Um, I brought some side dishes so just one would be fine."

Yumi called out to Kanako-chan, unsure of whether or not she was heard.

Kanako-chan seemed to overtake some people that had arrived much earlier, leading Yumi to wonder if she was being a bother to those around her. She couldn't just dismiss it as someone else's problem because Kanako-chan was acting as a stand-in for herself.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

Kanako-chan returned in no time at all, carrying three pastries.

"Ah, you bought three."

"Yes."

"Were you having any of these?"

"No, I brought my lunch."

It looked as though her earlier shout hadn't reached Kanako-chan's ears.

"That was pretty quick ... "

"Yeah."

"You didn't cut in line or anything did you?"

"Well, I was just recovering the spot that you had at the start. I don't think anyone has the right to complain about that."

"..."

Something there was not quite right. It wasn't quite right, but Yumi didn't think she'd be able to explain how in a way that Kanako-chan would understand.

Yumi wanted to lecture her about the virtues of waiting patiently in line but that wouldn't have gone over well.

"Anyway, which one did you want? I couldn't narrow it down to just one, so I bought the three I was considering."

– So it looked as though she had heard after all. Even so, Kanako-chan still bought three.

"How much were they?"

Yumi opened her purse.

"Um. For this jam bun?"

"No, how much for all of them?"

"Huh?"

There was no way Yumi could eat all three, but they'd all been bought for her and it wasn't as though she could return the other two.

"You weren't buying any for your own lunch, right Kanako-chan? So I'll pay for all of them."

"But."

"Don't worry about it, how much?"

"– No."

Kanako-chan said, looking down.

"I bought these of my own accord. You shouldn't have to pay because of that. These are all a gift. Please eat them with the rest of the Yamayurikai."

"Kanako-chan."

What should she do? Now she wasn't even accepting payment for one of them, let alone all three.

"I can't let you do that."

Yumi quickly calculated the cost of the three pastries in the bag. Then she took the exact amount from her purse and placed it in Kanako-chan's hand. However.

"I told you I won't take your money."

There was no way she was going to quietly accept the coins.

"And I told you I can't let you do that."

It was turning into a scene from a cafe with two old ladies bickering over who should pay – "I'll get it," "No, let me," – and they were making no progress at all. In the end, those old ladies must settle it somehow. If only there was some way she could consult them right now. There was no way they'd keep going until the store closed, so it seemed to Yumi as though they'd have to find some common ground and settle it.

"Stop."

Suddenly there was a flash of light.

"Yumi-san, and you over there. Why don't you calm down a bit and take a look around you?"

As expected, standing there was the self-proclaimed ace of the photography club, and Yumi's friend, Takeshima Tsutako-san. She lowered her camera and calmly stepped towards them.

"Around us ... ?"

Yumi took a look around as she was saying this and saw there was a ring of people surrounding her and Kanako-chan.

She didn't think they'd been talking that loudly, but she may have grown more and more boisterous without realizing it.

Even though it hadn't yet reached the level of an argument, an onlooker would probably see they were having a disagreement.

"Aha ... "

Yumi tried laughing to smooth things over but it was a waste of effort.

But, having taken Tsutako-san's advice to calm down and look around, how on earth was she supposed to regain control over the disturbance she'd caused? Kanako-chan looked down but didn't move either.

"First of all, Yumi-san will take the pastries. Then, you'll take the money that Yumi-san gives you. Okay?"

Tsutako-san briskly ordered them, taking over from the two people at the center of attention who were standing stock still and at their wits end. But still Kanako-chan stubbornly refused to accept the money.

"You may not like it, but just quietly do as you're told. Otherwise, the situation here won't be resolved."

"But."

"If she's willing to pay, you should let her. If you turn it into a big deal, it's going to get out of control. Or are you trying to make things worse for Yumi-san?"

Tsutako-san quietly reprimanded Kanako-chan, who eventually unclenched her right fist to accept the coins.

"Now that's done, I'm going to buy two of those pastries from Yumi-san. And with that, the case is closed. Sorry for the disturbance, everyone. It was just an exchange of pastries. Please continue to have a wonderful lunch break. See you."

Tsutako-san put an arm around Yumi and Kanako-chan's shoulders and walked off. They left Milk Hall like this, walking alongside each other. Yumi wasn't really sure what this would look like to the spectators, but she wasn't too concerned about that. She was still a bit surprised about the incident herself.

The only thing Yumi did know was that Tsutako-san had saved her. Who could tell how it would have ended if things had kept on with neither of them backing down in front of that crowd of people? She shivered just thinking about it.

After they'd walked a short distance from Milk Hall, Kanako-chan stopped and turned to Tsutako-san.

"Thank-you for resolving the situation. However, I bought all three of those pastries for Yumi-san."

"I know that. So does Yumi-san. Right?"

Yumi nodded at Tsutako-san's question. Yeah, she knew that alright. But there were things she could accept and things she couldn't accept.

Kanako-chan quickly bowed then ran off in the direction of the school building.

As they watched her leave, Tsutako-san muttered:

"I wonder what she was doing at Milk Hall in the first place."

"Ah, now that you mention it."

All she'd had on her was her purse, so she hadn't brought a lunchbox, but despite this she hadn't bought a pastry for herself either.

"Maybe she was buying a drink or something."

Like Touko-chan earlier. There were some students like that.

"In that case, she wouldn't have gone to the pastry counter, right?"

"I guess."

The drink vending machines were concentrated around the entrance to Milk Hall while the pastry counter was a fair way inside.

Well, people have all sorts of motives. And if motives is too grandiose a word, change it to reasons.

Because there was no point in worrying about each and every little detail. She was better off thinking about what she had to do right now.

"Tsutako-san."

Yumi stopped walking.

"What?"

"Thanks, you saved me."

Yumi felt she had to properly convey her gratitude. While they knew each other well enough that Tsutako-san knew this even if she didn't say anything, since she had the opportunity, she was better off putting it into words instead of being lazy.

Because even if she focused all her energy on beaming it telepathically, it might not reach the target's receiver. Alternatively, if her transmitter was broken, then it wouldn't get through even though she thought she'd sent it.

That's why analogue was best. Since you could tell almost instantaneously whether it had reached the target or not.

"Nah, it was nothing. I was just feeling a bit peckish so I thought I'd get something to eat. When I got to Milk Hall there was some kind of disturbance so I thought I'd stick my nose in to it. By intervening, I was able to get my hands on some pastries easily. I got something good out of it too, so don't mind me."

"A bit peckish ... ah, you ate your lunch earlier in the day, didn't you?"



"Ha ha ha."

Tsutako-san laughed to hide her embarrassment, then as they were standing on the door mat at the school building entrance she made a proposal.

"Are you busy, Yumi-san? Could you accompany me for a little while?"

"I don't mind. I was going to eat in the Rose Mansion, but they knew I had to go to Milk Hall so they're not waiting on me for anything."

Hearing this, Tsutako-san said, "Done," and snapped her fingers.

"Well then, let's get this pastry there right away."

"The pastry?"

Yumi was asking why and Tsutako-san grinned.

"Obviously, we're going to use it as a bribe."

## Part 3.

Even though they were standing on the mat, they didn't complete the task of wiping clean their indoor shoes. That was because they weren't going into the school building.

"The clubhouse ... "

Yumi mumbled, looking up at the two-story building behind the school block.

"Yeah. She's probably there."

Tsutako-san answered, full of confidence.

"You mean Mami-san?"

"Indeed. She said the manuscript for tomorrow's Lillian Kwaraban wasn't quite finished yet, so she'll probably be in the club room staring down the word processor. Her hair in a mess."

The clubhouse.

As the name suggested, the building was comprised of club rooms. But that didn't mean that every club had a room in this building. Various clubs used something other than a club room, for instance, the sports clubs used the gymnasium or martial arts building or sports fields as appropriate, the arts club used the arts room, the calligraphy club used the calligraphy room, the chemistry and science clubs used the science rooms, and the handicrafts club used the sewing room. So the clubs that lived here were those whose activities didn't require a special classroom, such as the Go club, the literary club, the manga research club, the photography club that Tsutako-san belonged to, and the newspaper club which published the school's newspaper, "Lillian Kwaraban."

That said, the club rooms weren't particularly large, so a lot of clubs used a classroom for their after-school activities and the club room was just used as a storage area. The newspaper club, however, made maximum use of their club room for their club activities.

Now then, into the building and up to the second-floor.

Even without looking at the name plates, she could tell which room was the newspaper club's because of the sound of someone furiously tapping away on a keyboard leaking out into the hallway.

Tsutako-san knocked then opened the door before the reply came from inside.

"Gokigenyou, Mami-san."

"... Tsutako-san."

Mami-san was alone in the club room. Her hair wasn't disheveled, but that's because she was wearing a headband, and she looked at them with a ferocious expression.

"And Yumi-san who hardly ever comes to the clubhouse ... what led to this curious turn of events? What are you scheming?"

Mami-san looked appropriately fatigued.

"We've brought supplies to show our support. You start craving sweets when you're thinking hard, right?"

Perhaps used to seeing her classmate like this, Tsutako-san steadily advanced into the club room. Not wanting to be left standing outside in the corridor alone, Yumi said, "Pardon my intrusion," and stepped inside.

"A jam bun?"

Mami-san's expression softened slightly when she saw what was being offered.

"Or there's a choc cornet and an almond danish. Take whichever one you'd prefer."

Tsutako-san was acting as though they were all hers as she encouraged Mami-san to take one, but Mami-san looked at Yumi suspiciously and quietly asked:

"But thankfully they're all sweets. Were these Yumi-san's request?"

"That's about right."

They were all Kanako-chan's selection.

"So what did you want me to do?"

Mami-san asked as she reached out for the jam bun, which looked the sweetest. So she hadn't believed they were just showing their support after all. Although since they'd brought these as bribes, her impression wasn't exactly wrong.

"Yumi-san was involved in a bit of a mix-up just now."

Tsutako-san sat down and spoke in a bored tone of voice as she opened the wrapping of the almond danish. She glanced at Yumi as though to say, "Just watch," so Yumi silently watched on and let Tsutako-san handle it. With that, she pulled over a chair and sat down.

"It was a bit conspicuous so I'm sure you'll hear about it, but we came here to discuss if you could not write about it in the Lillian Kwaraban."

"What kind of mix-up?"

Mami-san raised her eyebrows.

"It was no big deal. A discussion about the price of something, whether it was a gift or not, that sort of thing."

"Hmm."

Mami-san didn't show much interest, apparently deciding that it was indeed no big deal. Thinking about it, the Lillian Kwaraban probably wouldn't run something like that anyway.

"I don't mind."

Negotiations complete. With that, Mami-san started eating the jam bun to give her tired brain some energy.

Yumi opened her small Tupperware container, in a hurry to start her lunch too. Unfortunately, the choc cornet didn't go particularly well with her side dishes of seaweed seasoned fried egg and tempura eggplant.

"Yumi-san. This isn't intended as a bargaining point, but is there anything happening with the Yamayurikai that we could write about?"

"Nope."

The immediate response.

"Weren't you typing away at something earlier, Mami-san?"

"I was just writing out a boring article for my own peace of mind. I don't want to write about something like a teacher's favorite saying."

Mami-san squeezed hard on her half-eaten jam bun. Hello, are you okay with the jam flying out of the bun?

"At least give me a hint about the Yamayurikai play."

"No can do."

If she'd said she didn't know what it was going to be, the Lillian Kavaraban probably would have run an article about that, that's how starved for material they looked. So she had to be careful not to let anything slip.

"Fair enough. Then, Yumi-san, do you have any plans to take a petit soeur anytime soon?"

"No, I don't."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No, it's true."

" ... Well, okay. Let's put that to one side for now. What about Yoshino-san?"

"I haven't heard anything."

Yumi expected Mami-san to respond with, "You haven't heard anything because there's no plans?" but she didn't venture to ask this.

"Shimako-san ... ah, she's already got Noriko-chan as her petit soeur, hasn't she?"

Having finished eating, Mami-san crumpled up the bun's plastic wrapper and slumped over the keyboard. She'd apparently been craving material so badly that she'd forgotten the basic composition of the Rose families.

"Actually, about Noriko-chan."

Mami-san abruptly raised her head.

"Hm?"

"Yumi-san, do you know Takuya-kun?"

"He's Noriko-chan's friend, right? Another Buddhist statue admirer."

She'd never inquired into him but his name would occasionally pop up when Shimako-san and Noriko-chan were talking to each other.

"The meeting – "

"Meeting? With who? Takuya-kun?"

"Ah, forget it."

Mami-san gave a small shake of her head and aborted the conversation, but it seemed like she was thinking about something else. So, in contrast to the question, Yumi decided to give a proper response.

"I haven't met him, but I think Shimako-san has. I heard that Takuya-kun used to visit Shimako-san's house before he met Noriko-chan."

Shimako-san's household included a temple that was passed down through the generations. She'd heard that they also possessed an ancient statue of Buddha, so it was easy to imagine him becoming acquainted with Shimako-san's father in order to view it.

"But why do you ask?"

"No real reason. I was just wondering what sort of person he was."

Although it hadn't felt like she'd been asking for no real reason. It felt like there'd been something more meaningful behind it, as though she were looking for something.

"I didn't think the Lillian Kowaraban wrote about outsiders all that much."

"That's not what I had in mind... not now."

What had she meant by "not now?" It could mean it was something she was going to do in the future, or it could be something she'd thought about in the past but decided against. The meaning changed completely depending on whether it was the former or the latter.

"If you're interested, why don't you talk to Noriko-chan or Shimako-san directly? I heard them talking about inviting him to our school festival. As long as they agree, you should be fine writing an article about it."

"I told you, I've decided not to write about him now, alright."

"Ah, right."

So apparently it was the latter. But why did she get so agitated about it?

"But ... okay. So Takuya-kun might be coming to the school festival."

Mami-san muttered with a far-away look in her eyes. Yumi thought that perhaps Mami-san also knew Takuya-kun, but she didn't venture to ask. She got the feeling that Mami-san would just deny it.

Just then, Yumi heard the sound of footsteps echoing along the second-floor club house corridor.

The footsteps stopped in front of the newspaper club's clubroom and the door was flung open.

"Mami-san! Huge scoop! Rosa Chinensis en bouton had a massive fight with a first-year petit soeur candidate in Milk Hall!"

The second-year newspaper club member that had rushed into the room got that far before she finally noticed Yumi and her eyes went wide in shock. But she'd probably rehearsed this countless times in order to convey the information as quickly as possible, and having said that much she couldn't stop half-way through.

"They were stopped by the photography club's Takeshima Tsu...ta... "

"Yes, gokigenyou, I'm the photography club's Takeshima Tsutako."

Seeing not just Yumi but also Tsutako-san there, the newspaper club member trailed off and fell to her knees in the doorway, saying, "No way."

"The mix-up was with Hosokawa Kanako – "

Mami-san fixed her gaze on Tsutako-san. Since she already knew Kanako-chan's full name, it appeared they'd already marked her.

"Yep. The pastries were the cause. But you've already eaten yours Mami-san. You can't write a story about it any more."

"You tricked me."

"I did no such thing. I did what was in the best interests of the newspaper club."

Tsutako-san answered aloofly.

"In what way?"

Mami-san seemed to be annoyed by Tsutako-san's feigned innocence.

"If you fanned the flames saying she was a petit soeur candidate and it turned out to be wrong, it'd be a major embarrassment, wouldn't it?"

"You're saying it's wrong?"

"I don't know, why ask me?"

With that, Mami-san's gaze immediately slid from Tsutako-san to Yumi.

"Yumi-san."

"I haven't decided anything yet."

Yumi had already told her that she had no plans, but Mami-san must have forgotten that with all the confusion.

"Is she going to be your petit soeur or not?"

"Calm down, Mami-san."

A voice came to Yumi's aid as Mami-san towered over her.

It was neither Tsutako-san, nor Mami-san, nor even the newspaper club member that had arrived earlier. It was the voice of a fifth person.

"It seems Kanako-san won't be Rosa Chinensis en bouton's petit soeur."

The girl pushed past the exhausted looking club member by the doorway and moved to the center of the room.

"How do you know?"

Mami-san asked. Since she hadn't asked the girl who she was, she was probably another newspaper club member.

"I asked her myself."

"You asked her? You asked Hosokawa Kanako herself?"

"Yes."

Questioning revealed that the new arrival was a motivated rookie who'd joined the newspaper club because she admired the president, Tsukiyama Minako-sama, and the current chief editor, Yamaguchi Mami-san. Consequently, she spent a lot of her time gathering information so that she could run down a scoop and make it her own.

"I hit her with it directly, "Are you going to be Rosa Chinensis en bouton's petit soeur?""

"And, and?"

Mami-san urged her to continue but the rookie smiled indifferently.

"She tried to hide behind a smile. Like this."

"Wh-why'd she do that?"

"She said, "I don't have any such pedestrian ambition.""

"Pedestrian ambition?"

Mami-san was dumbfounded and Tsutako-san let out a whistle.

"So then I asked her, "What if Yumi-sama begged you to be her soeur?""

The rookie seemed to be holding back as she looked at Yumi. But when she was urged on with, "How did she respond to that?" her attitude reversed completely and she answered without restraint.



"She said she'd refuse."

"... She'd refuse."

Yumi repeated those unexpected words. Refusing meant that she didn't want to be her petit soeur.

Why'd she do that?

Even though they seemed to get along well. She had no plans to become her petit soeur.

For Kanako-chan, becoming Yumi's petit soeur was a pedestrian ambition. So much so that a conversation about it would only make her laugh.

"On top of that, when she found out I was a member of the newspaper club, she said I couldn't put that in an article."

The rookie reported in a business-like manner.

"She said you couldn't put it in an article?"

"Well, that was the gist of it. Her actual words were a bit more pointed."



that Yumi held of Kanako-chan was rocked even more.

"How are you feeling? Shocked?"

Hearing Tsutako-san call out to her, Yumi raised her head.

"Shocked ... ? No, I'm not really sure. I was just wondering, "What on earth is she thinking?"

"You're wondering what Miss Hosokawa Kanako is thinking?"

"Yeah."

Putting her thoughts into words.

"I wish I knew more about her."

Like what was Kanako-chan feeling?

What was she looking for from the person Fukuzawa Yumi?

Since she'd declared the soeur system to be "pedestrian," what then did she value? Those were the sort of questions Yumi wanted to ask her.

Even though she knew there were all sorts of people in the world and they all had their own points of view. It was hard to see those differing points of view from the outside.

"Hold on, Yumi-san."

Mami-san said, taking off her headband.

"How about you set aside the first-year who apparently doesn't want to be your soeur and think more about your poor classmate."

"Even if I did, it wouldn't help."

Unfortunately, Yumi had no material she could offer. Although she sympathized completely with the teary-eyed and shoulder-slumped Mami-san.

"Not much you can do about it, Yumi-san. But since Mami-san's at her wit's end and calling herself "your poor classmate," don't you think you should pitch in and help?"

Tsutako-san pulled out her camera and turned to Yumi.

"Pitch in?"

"Of course, it won't be for free, Mami-san. How about the cost of those three pastries we just ate?"

At first glance Tsutako-san looked like a meddler, but she also seemed to be taking a little, no, a lot of enjoyment out of this situation.

# Finding Me

## Part 1.

"So what happened then?"

Yuuki asked, spinning around on his chair.

"Not much."

Yumi answered, as she leaned back on her brother's bed and tossed a cushion in the air.

"We went to the old greenhouse and they took photos of me with a Rosa Chinensis bud. They're calling it the "Rose Name Series.""

A recent shot of a Rose family member from a Takeshima Tsutako photo-shoot and a mini-interview. Mami-san was jumping for joy as she paid for the pastries.

"Is it okay for you to be doing that on your own?"

Her little brother asked as he tossed the towel he'd dried his hair with over the bed's headboard. Yumi hastily dodged out of the way.

"I got permission from Sachiko-sama. I only co-operated with the newspaper club because she said okay. The Yamayurikai's busy too, so it's a pain if the newspaper club follows us around looking for something to write about. Since they're calling it a series, we'll be able to keep them quiet for a little while with just a photo and a short comment."

Still, Rosa Chinensis was a perennial so they could find one blooming in the greenhouse at any time, but what about Rosa Foetida and Rosa Gigantea? Well, as long as they had the name of one of the Roses in the title, the newspaper club probably didn't care about the actual flower.

"Hmm. Still, since we're both so busy we don't get to talk that much. Sounds like there's lots going on at your school too, Yumi."

"Well yeah."

Yumi adjusted her pajama trousers around the knee and sat down cross-legged.

She longed for a quiet and peaceful school life, but she couldn't really spend much time in blissful ignorance. She was Rosa Chinensis en bouton after all.

Yuuki was just as busy, or probably even more so, since he'd been getting home after 7 or 8 at night for a while now. The Hanadera Academy's school festival was next weekend.

The upshot of this was that they'd been having dinner separately and Yuuki was so tired that Yumi would regularly find him lying down in bed when she thought he'd gone for a bath.

Since, unusually, he got home before 7pm today, the entire family had had dinner together for the first time in a while. It really had been a long time since they'd chatted like this before bed.

"By the way, what about Alice? What happened after that?"

Yumi asked the question that had been nagging at her.

"What do you mean?"

"That thing before, where it was like he was being haunted .... what was it, shivers?"

That was it. The victim of "something akin to a haunting but it's probably actually a human" was Arisugawa Kintarou-kun, also known as Alice.

"Ah. Alice has been fine since then."

"Alice has?"

So it sounded like someone other than Alice hadn't been fine. Her curiosity piqued, Yumi questioned him further.

"Kobayashi's been acting kinda strange."

Was the response she got.

"Does Kobayashi-kun have a bad feeling like he's being haunted by something too?"

"No, it's the opposite. He seems to be walking around in an inexplicably good mood."

Yuuki shrugged.

"A good mood?"

"He says someone's got a crush on him, so he's on cloud nine."

What was that all about? Yumi shrugged. Well, Kobayashi-kun was the sort of person who could get a bit carried away.

"Alice is one thing, but I think Kobayashi has the completely wrong impression. He hasn't noticed it himself, but he's picked up Alice's shadow."

Apparently one or two days after Alice had said something about his bad feeling, Kobayashi-kun had happily announced, "Me too."

"But one's a bad feeling and the other a good feeling. They're the complete opposite."

"Not necessarily. They both involve someone harboring a strong emotion towards them, so in that sense it's the same. Depending on how they interpret that, they could have either a bad feeling or a good feeling, don't you think?"

"I see."

That was another way of looking at it.

Someone was watching them.

Whether they took it as a friendly gaze or a hostile gaze would vastly alter their impression of the onlooker.

"Ah, right."

Yuuki suddenly changed the topic, as though he'd just remembered something.

"Are any of the Roses afraid of heights?"

"Why?"

"Everyone sort of got carried away and they've made enormous towers."

"Towers?"

"Yeah. For the Roses to judge from."

"Ah – "

Yumi clasped her hands together.

That's right, Sachiko-sama and the other Roses had been asked to be judges and presenters at Hanadera Academy's school festival. From memory, it was called the "Hanadera War" or something.

"It's tall, huh."

"Well ... yeah."

Yuuki answered somewhat reluctantly.

He said that while they were building it, they kept going, "More, more," and things escalated so it was about 1.5 times larger than the original blueprint.

According to Yuuki, "When building this sort of thing, guys tend to be generous." But then he said, "Their eyes were sparkling, like little kids playing with building blocks." Boys were hard to understand.

"If there's someone that can't handle heights, we'll have to change the towers. But in that case, the sooner you let me know the better."

"Alright. I'll ask around."

Having agreed to this, Yumi rose from her younger brother's bed.

As she left the room, Yumi turned around to say goodnight but Yuuki was already nodding off in his chair.



## Part 2.

"Heights? Ah, Sachiko's no good with them."

Rei-sama said, after school in the Rose Mansion.

"That's what I thought."

It was just as Yumi had expected.

"That's what you thought? So you knew about it, Yumi-chan?"

"Well, a while ago she told me she wouldn't go on the roller coaster. So I thought it might be because of that."

"The roller coaster? Ah, from when you asked her to take you to the amusement park."

As a combination birthday / White Day present for Yumi, they'd agreed to go on a half-day date at an amusement park. For a number of reasons it had been put off and pushed back, and at present it had been shelved for four months.

"Although back then I sort of felt as though it was because she didn't want to go on something fast."

"Ah, but she doesn't like cars either. You should know that, right Yumi-chan?"

"You mean how she gets carsick when traveling long distances?"

She knew that much, even in their first year together. Although the fact that Sachiko-sama had a weak constitution was something she'd been reminded of recently.

"Right, right. But despite this, she still blindly followed her father overseas when he asked. Did you hear about that?"

Rei-sama lowered her voice. Implying that Sachiko-sama had a father-complex proportionate to her man-hatred.

"One of my uncles would get a bit tipsy before getting on a plane, to distract himself from his fear of flying. But Sachiko's underage, so she can't get drunk, right? So what does she do? She relies on the power of medicine. She'll have some just before takeoff, then sleep. Get something to eat, more medicine, and sleep. Like that. On the plane trip for the school excursion, people get up out of their seats to go

to the toilet, right? Passing Sachiko's class, all anyone could see was her passed out with drool running down her face."

As Rei-sama laughed heartily there was the sound of someone clearing their throat.

"Who did you say was drooling?"

Unluckily, it was Sachiko-sama herself who had opened the biscuit door and stepped inside. She had an incredible presence, because she'd apparently met up with Yoshino-san, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan somewhere on the way here and they were following her like a retinue.

But.

"Oh, I was just speaking figuratively. No, more of an exaggeration, I suppose."

Rei-sama was neither wounded nor scratched by the glare from her good friend Sachiko-sama. She leaned back in her chair, her head held high.

"Yumi, you mustn't believe Rei's horror stories."

On her way past, Sachiko-sama gently poked Yumi on the forehead.

"Ah, right."

Still, Yumi didn't think the entire thing was a horror story. The part about her sleeping for almost the entire time in the air sounded like the truth and she may even have had a little bit of drool. As she was thinking this –

"That'd be nice, going on a school trip."

She'd unconsciously said what she was thinking, which made Sachiko-sama smile.

"It's not long now until your turn, Yumi."

"Yes."

She obediently responded then stood up to go and prepare the tea. However.

That wasn't it.

The words, "That'd be nice," hadn't sprang from her mouth just because she wanted to go on a school trip. Yumi was coveting "going on a school trip with Sachiko-sama."

They'd both attended Lillian's Girls Academy since kindergarten but since they were one grade apart they'd never been on a school trip together.

Of course, that wasn't limited to just school excursions – they'd never been in the same class, never worked on the same graduation project, nor shared the same page in a school yearbook.

And it went without saying that the majority of her time at school was spent separated from her beloved onee-sama.

Just think, if she was in the same class as Sachiko-sama and had a seat near hers, she could spend all that time watching her. Yumi was suddenly jealous of Sachiko-sama's classmates.

Although if they were in the same grade, Yumi couldn't have become her petit soeur. In the end, she knew she was asking for too much.

"Yumi-sama, I can do the rest."

Noriko-chan offered to help but Yumi turned her down with, "It's okay, I've got it."

She was making the tea for Sachiko-sama. Yumi considered the precious time they spent together, the accumulation of trivialities, as her treasures.

That was why she politely and carefully prepared the tea.

All the while hoping this would make it just that little bit more delicious.

"By the way, what led you to discussing aeroplanes?"

Sachiko-sama asked as she sipped the tea that may or may not have tasted a bit better than usual.

"Ah, we were talking about the Hanadera Academy school festival."

Sachiko-sama's eyes clouded over after hearing the details, much like Yumi had expected.

"Um, onee-sama? If it's no good, my brother said they can remake them."

"But that would also increase the cost. And all the time and effort they've put in so far will be for nothing, right?"

As expected of Sachiko-sama. Since she was so involved with their own school festival, she was well aware of things like costs and construction schedules.

"It'll be a bother to them too, right?"

Sachiko-sama let out a heavy sigh.

Naturally, it would be a problem for the Hanadera students who'd made the platforms bigger than planned, but that didn't mean they couldn't tell them to remake them. Although they hadn't stated that the platforms had to be less than a certain height.

"Understood. Then I'll humbly take your place atop the tower, onee-sama."

Yumi thumped her chest, "Leave it to me." At which point Sachiko-sama nimbly took hold of her fist and said:

"Please stop, Yumi. I'd rather do it myself than force it on you. No matter the height, I'll fulfill my duties as Rosa Chinensis superbly, so just watch on quietly."

"But he said it was like looking down at the ground from a second-floor window."

"The second floor?"

"Yeah."

Yumi nodded and Sachiko-sama laughed a high-pitched "Hohoho."

"In that case it's completely fine. The second floor is only as high as the first-floor roof, right? Leaning out a window at that height is nothing at all. You couldn't possibly think that I can't go to the third-floor of the school building, right?"

"... No."

She hadn't thought that.

She hadn't thought that, but had Sachiko-sama properly considered how she'd feel out in the open without the walls and ceiling around her? To say nothing of the fact that the towers were built by untrained high-school students.

Shaky and precarious. Even without seeing them, Yumi could picture them easily enough.

"Enough, no more grumbling. Please just tell Yuuki-san that we understand. Don't say anything more than necessary."

"... Alright."

Even though Yumi didn't think she was grumbling, she knew that Sachiko-sama would just dig in further if she said anything more so she chose to quietly withdraw. But she thought she should be prepared to step in quickly if the real thing turned out to be too much for Sachiko-sama.

"You've become quite adept at handling Sachiko, Yumi-chan."

Rei-sama whispered softly.

"Huh, no. That wasn't what I intended."

It wasn't what she intended but somehow it had worked out like that.

Although it felt like she'd unwittingly pushed Sachiko-sama to the top of a tall tower.

"Shimako-sa~n."

Yoshino-san called out leisurely, since it didn't affect her directly

"Are you okay with heights, Shimako-san?"

"The second-floor? It might be a little scary."

By putting it into words like that Shimako-san showed she was the type of person who could look at reality and calmly assess the situation.

In contrast.

"Oh, don't look so worried. It'll be a piece of cake. Now, let's get to work, to work."

Sachiko-sama was the type of person that convinced themselves they'd be fine then tried not to think about it any more, which left Yumi feeling nervous.

## Part 3.

Tsutako-san was sitting in her classroom seat after school and sighing.

"What's the matter? You're not going home?"

"Ah, Yumi-san. Good timing ... or bad, maybe."

Yumi had been in the Rose Mansion working on school festival related tasks but they'd reached a break in their work so she'd returned to the classroom to pick up something she'd forgotten.

They'd had PE today so she had to take her PE clothes home. The days were still warm despite it being September and she didn't dare leave her sweat-stained shirt and leggings in her locker for two days.

"What's up?"

There were a number of photos on Tsutako-san's desk. She was probably in the middle of sorting them, since they were spread out face-up like a deck of cards. Because Tsutako-san took a lot of hidden-camera photos around campus, it wasn't that unusual to see her like this.

Sorting them by person, or by those that were okay to publish and those that weren't, or by those that would inevitably be torn up. How she divided them changed depending on the occasion.

"Oh, are all of these photos of me?"

Yumi picked up a few to have a closer look. About ten photos of Fukuzawa Yumi, all taken without her notice.

"That's right."

Tsutako-san never tried to talk her way out of these situations.

She had indeed taken them. She wouldn't publish them if you didn't want. She would give you a copy if you wanted one. But they were such good shots that you should share them with the world. – That's how these conversations generally went.

"I was thinking about the school festival when I took these photos of you. For the photography club's display."

"But why me?"

"Because it was a huge success last year. That giant panel of you and Sachiko-sama. So I thought I'd rely on the Red Rose soeurs again this year."

"Hey."

So was that why she'd said, "Good timing or bad?" But at this point Yumi couldn't see what was "bad" about it.

"So what's troubling you, Tsutako-san?"

"Do I look troubled?"

"Totally."

Since she was sitting alone in the gloom of an unlit classroom, her arms folded and sighing deeply. Even if she wasn't troubled, she was thinking deeply about something difficult.

"What is it? Is there a problem with your subject?"

"Yumi-san is cute. Wonderful as always."

"... Is that so?"

Tsutako-san would often praise her even though Yumi thought she looked plain and clumsy in the photos. Although, if pressed, she'd admit that recently she'd come to realize that Tsutako-san liked those sorts of photos. Instead of photos of everyone saying "Cheese" and looking at the camera, Tsutako-san preferred ones where the subjects were looking off into the distance, or nonchalantly going about their daily lives.

"But when did you take these?"

As well as the ones at school, there were some that looked like they were taken while she was commuting to or from school. Ones where she was walking side-by-side with Sachiko-sama in front of the train station, or talking excitedly with Shimako-san at the bus stop. Although as expected, there weren't any of her lying in bed with her stomach growling, nor any bath scenes.

"Yumi-san is fine."

Tsutako-san repeated.

"Then what's wrong?"

"You don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

She tried to remember earlier photos she'd been in but couldn't see how they differed to these. Of course the situations and the times were all different. It didn't seem like there was any significant improvement or decline in the photographer's skill either.

"It's not so obvious in the first few."

Tsutako-san gathered the photos into a bundle then sorted them and placed a couple in front of Yumi.

"But by this point it should be incredibly obvious."

"Huh?"

Tsutako-san pulled out three "incredibly obvious" photos and lined them up on the desk. Then.

"Ah!?"

Even someone as slow as Yumi could see it clearly. She'd completely missed it when casually looking over them, but with them laid out like this the problem became apparent. Then once she'd worked it out, she took another look at the "not so obvious" photos and while the problem didn't stand out it was indeed there too.

"— So you see, I can't display these."

Tsutako-san said.

"It's a shame, but I'll have to destroy the negatives. It'd be a disaster if the newspaper club got their hands on these."

"What a waste."

"Yeah. Although, I didn't notice it until I developed them. Since you didn't seem to know about it either, maybe nobody would notice if we played dumb and displayed one of these at the school festival."

But Tsutako-san would know. Yumi would know too. If one of the photos was on display they'd probably be irrationally irritated by the problem.

"I could trim them down to just you."

"No, there's no need."

Up until now, Yumi had received a copy of most of the photos Tsutako-san had taken of her, but this time she held back.



Holding a photo that was trimmed down to just her, she wouldn't be able to keep herself from thinking about the world left behind. That said, she had neither the talent nor the nerve to take responsibility for the dozen or so photos that Tsutako-san had decided to destroy. To say nothing of the wisdom required to make the right decision.

"It's kinda scary."

"Looking at it from your point of view, it is a bit."

Tsutako-san gathered the photos and put them in an envelope.

"It ends for me when I destroy these, but what will you do, Yumi-san?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe you'd have been better off not knowing."

"No, it's alright. Thanks."

Yumi picked up the bag with her PE clothes and walked unsteadily out of the classroom.

Should she talk to Sachiko-sama about this?

(I know I shouldn't hide things from onee-sama when I'm talking to her.)

But she didn't want this to get blown out of proportion. On top of that, she still hadn't sorted out her own feelings.

Tsutako-san's photos. Was there a chance it was just a coincidence?

(A dozen coincidences?)

Could that sort of thing happen?

In the photos, her hair was tied with a variety of ribbons. That was definitive proof that they were taken on different days. And yet, in each of them, that shadow behind her –

On her way back to the Rose Mansion, Yumi looked over her shoulder a number of times.

Maybe there was someone there.

The dozen photos were causing a disturbance in Yumi's chest.

## Part 4.

The following day was Friday so Yumi informed everyone that she had something she had to attend to, then put in an hour of work before leaving the Rose Mansion early.

It was halfway between when school let out and when after-school activities ended, so there were hardly any students walking along the path lined with ginkgo trees.

It had been a while since she'd left school on her own.

It felt a bit strange to not have her friends beside her. She wondered if she'd get used to it before too long.

With no-one in front, behind, or to the left or right of her, Yumi keenly felt the cool breeze passing by. She thought of the young lady that had caused the cool breeze of uneasiness to blow through her heart.

Perhaps that girl would call out to her. A part of her was expecting this as she walked.

If she did call out to her, Yumi thought she would suggest they walk together. Then as they walked, she'd have a chance to ask the question she had to ask.

Yumi walked slowly without looking back. The wind that blew through the ginkgo leaves ruffled both her hair and her heart.

"Yumi-chan."

However, the voice that called out to her belonged to someone else.

"... Sei-sama."

The former Rosa Gigantea and current Lillian's University student, Satou Sei-sama, flew over to Yumi's side like she'd jumped the fence from the university grounds. Her blue-and-white-striped shirt had a white sailor collar, showing the barest traces of Sei-sama as she had been when she was Rosa Gigantea.

"Heading home?"

"Yeah."

Yumi nodded, since she was undoubtedly heading home, then Sei-sama put her arm around her shoulder and whispered into her ear:

"By the way, you know there's a creeper?"

"A creeper? That's a bit rude."

"Ah, so you did know. My apologies."

But she only knew because of Tsutako-san's photos, without those who knew how long Yumi might have remained ignorant. And yet Sei-sama had figured it out after a quick glance. Just proving she wasn't an average human being.

"So how far you taking that?"

Sei-sama didn't turn around, instead she jerked her fist up, pointing her thumb behind her.

"To the school gate, for now."

"The school gate? Is there something at the school gate?"

"If I lied you'd find out soon enough ... there is something."

This was an unexpected development. So would the addition of essence of Satou Sei-sama to the previously prepared meal bring good luck or bad? It was impossible to predict.

"I won't get in your way so can I watch?"

"You're not going to quietly walk away if I say no anyway."

"Exactly."

What choice did she have? Yumi resigned herself to fate. Sei-sama was the sort of person who could be annoyingly persistent.

Upon recognizing Yumi, the person leaning against the gatepost lazily waved and smiled.

"Yo, Yumi-chan."

As she looked up at his face, Yumi idly thought, "Of course he'd greet me with, "Yo.""

"Either way, sending Kashiwagi-san ... "

Why did he stand out so much when he was wearing a plain cotton shirt over a deep blue T-shirt and a completely ordinary pair of jeans? Was it his actions, or his face brimming with self-confidence? At any rate, he was tall and stylish, which would make his presence felt. Yumi was once more relieved that there were hardly

any students around. The handful of students at the bus stop were obviously conscious of what was happening as they kept glancing her way.

"You're as cute as ever."

Kashiwagi-san played with her hair bunches like he might with a puppy's tail.

"Don't you think you're going a bit too far?"

Yumi grinned as she batted away his overly-familiar hands.

"Going too far? Don't be like that. This isn't an act, I'm just taking this chance to let my true feelings out."

He placed his right hand over his heart as he brought his face closer to hers. His expression looking like he was about to shout, "Juliet!"

"My apologies. But, I'm female."

Kashiwagi-san was drunk on himself so she pushed his head back to its normal position. If things had kept going, it looked as though they might have kissed.

"Female. What's wrong with that? I adore women. Because without women there would be no men."

"Well, that's true, but."

It wasn't that she'd said the keyword "female" because she wanted to get into that kind of conversation. It was just that Kashiwagi-san preferred men and Yumi was simply asserting that as a female she wasn't a target for his affection.

"Setting that aside, what's up with your creeper? She seems a bit different to what Yukichi described."

"Creeper? How rude."

Having just been christened a creeper, Sei-sama appeared from the shadow of the gate and scowled at Kashiwagi-san.

"Sei-sama."

"Oh right, I said I was going to watch on quietly, didn't I? But how could I walk away when I saw the ginkgo prince sinking his poisonous fangs into cute little Yumi-chan right before my very eyes?"

"You're wrong."

There was a reason for this. But Kashiwagi-san and Sei-sama were both the type of people that would keep on talking without giving her a chance to explain.

She tried to start, but the tempo of the conversation was too fast and she couldn't really break into it.

"So we're in agreement that Yumi-chan is cute. But, ginkgo prince? That's inexcusable. You couldn't possibly be referring to me, could you?"

Couldn't possibly.

"Who else is there but you, you prick?"

As usual, Sei-sama became foul-mouthed when talking to Kashiwagi-san.

"Women shouldn't say things like that."

"Is that why you said what you did before? Stop putting boxes around men and women. Your adoration of women just shows how indelibly stained you are with those old ways of thinking."

"Men and women are fundamentally different. Since you want to be treated as an equal, saying that just makes you come across as childish."

"While I'd very much like to refute you in great detail, I don't think we'd ever come to an agreement, so I'm going to stop this argument for now. By the way, how was I wrong, Yumi-chan?"

Yumi had been opening and closing her mouth like a goldfish, waiting for the right time to jump into their conversation, and at long last that chance had arrived.

"Um, well you see, Sei-sama. Kashiwagi-san was just acting friendly because my brother asked him. Right?"

Yumi sought confirmation from Kashiwagi-san, since it would be bad for both of them for this weird misunderstanding to remain. But that Kashiwagi-san.

"Not at all. I volunteered."

"V-volunteered?"

"Yep. Yukichi and the others were secretly discussing something in the student council room so I drew it out of them and got them to entrust it to me."

Hearing this, Sei-sama spat out the following words in shock:

"Seriously, showing up at school after you've graduated.. Don't you know that people who do that are the most hated type of graduates?"

Sei-sama had apparently completely forgotten her initial promise to watch without interfering. She kept nipping at Kashiwagi-san like a dog that was looking

to pick a fight while being taken for a walk. Yumi considered trying to stop her, but if she got involved it might just excite matters further so she decided to watch on. From a distance, it probably looked like they were all close friends.

"That's too bad for you then. I was invited back by my juniors. Six months after graduation. Life's tough when you're an adored senior."

"Asked back? By the student council?"

"No, by the mystery novel club."

"Why would a guest of the mystery novel club be in the student council room? Or, what? Does the mystery novel club meet in the student council room at Hanadera Academy?"

"Well, since I was already there, I decided to pop in and pay them a visit."

"I suppose you mainly wanted to get a look at Yuuki's face."

"You got it. But where's the harm in that?"

"Alright. However, I can't ignore your overly familiar behavior towards Yumi-chan."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, that Kashiwagi-san's just pretending to be close."

"I'm not pretending. I really do want to be close to you."

"I'm sorry, Kashiwagi-san, but can you please stop talking until I tell you to. You're complicating the conversation."

Enough already. She had to go back to the start and correct her explanation.

"Basically, what I was saying was – "

Yumi said as she resumed slowly walking. But while it was good that Kashiwagi-san was staying silent, she was no longer sure just how she should explain this.

"The goal was to let your annoying chaperone see you being close to a guy. Am I wrong, Yumi-chan?"

Sei-sama asked, arriving at the conclusion early.

"No, that's right."

The "annoying chaperone" part was a bit wrong though.

"Was this plan something you came up with on your own?"

" ... No. It was my brother and his friends."

"I'll bet. Ah, the bus is here. Shall we get on?"

"Yeah."

Yumi jogged over to the bus stop, arriving just as the bus to M station was leisurely pulling up and opening its doors. The students already waiting there had formed into a line and climbed on board in turn. Students that had just walked out the school gate, and those that had been chatting to their friends who came by car, spotted the bus and quickly ran over.

"You're coming too?"

Sei-sama asked, looking at Kashiwagi-san who was following them in silence. Now it kind of felt like Kashiwagi-san was being the creeper.

"So what happened to your pretentious chili red car?"

"..."

No reply was forthcoming.

"You can talk now, Kashiwagi-san."

Yumi broke the spell and Kashiwagi-san took a deep breath and laughed, saying, "It's hard not to talk."

"Still, my chilli red car? You're one to talk, Satou-kun. What about your mustard yellow car?"

"Lillian's University doesn't allow commuting by car."

"Same with Hanadera University. I was on my way home after class today."

"Ohh."

"Given the choice, I'd much rather have hidden my car somewhere and taken Yumi-chan for a drive, but if we did that then we couldn't be tailed."

"By the creeper?"

"Yeah. So let's move a bit further towards the back."

To be more easily tailed.

A single Lillian's student got on right at the very last moment and then the bus took off. She slid into a seat in the front row and didn't turn around once during the trip to M station.

Seated in the back, Yumi probably wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't already known who it was.



## Part 5.

The following day.

After cleaning, Kanako-chan paid a visit to Yumi's classroom and asked her, "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. It's been a while since we last talked."

Yumi immediately agreed and went with her. Kanako-chan had suddenly stopped appearing after the pastry incident.

Kanako-chan walked in silence. At first Yumi thought there was somewhere specific she was heading for but that didn't seem to be the case.

Well, maybe there had been somewhere she was aiming for but she'd had to change plans because there was already someone at that spot, or it didn't seem conducive to a quiet conversation, or something along those lines. They walked together from the courtyard to the back of the school then circled around the gymnasium.

It was after school on Saturday.

The weather was fine.

The students that were staying into the afternoon had already spread out around the courtyard and the rest of the school grounds to enjoy their lunches.

There were plenty of students heading home, as well as some classes still cleaning – perhaps because their homeroom had gone over time. If they waited just a little while they'd be sure to find some place suitable, but given Kanako-chan's concerned expression it didn't seem like they'd be able to idly while away the time.

Consequently, Yumi led her to the old greenhouse. Hardly anyone visited that spot.

Kanako-chan's face finally softened slightly when they reached that secluded location.

The outside looked as dilapidated as ever but the inside was surprisingly tidy, and the roses and other plants were all growing strong and healthy. Just who was it that took care of all of them?

"Was there something you wanted to discuss?"

Yumi asked quietly. Then, without any introduction, Kanako-chan pleaded:

"Please don't go to the Hanadera Academy school festival tomorrow."

"Huh!?"

Yumi had plenty of things she wanted to discuss too, but this topic of Kanako-chan's was completely unexpected. So she was dumbfounded when Kanako-chan broke the ice with, "Don't go to the school festival."

"I don't mean to be rude, Yumi-sama, but you're not yet a Rose so it should be fine if you don't go."

"Well, that's true, but."

Officially, Hanadera Academy had only requested the assistance of the three Roses. Technically, the boutons did not have to attend.

"From what I heard, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama didn't attend last year."

"Hasekura Rei-sama did."

"But doesn't that just show attendance is voluntary? If you said you didn't want to go, then you wouldn't have to go, right?"

"It's not like that."

It was hard to explain but it wasn't as simple as that. While Yumi was searching for words, Kanako-chan asked her directly:

"Or do you want to go?"

Since she was being so straightforward, Yumi perversely found herself wanting to investigate.

"Why don't you want me to go, Kanako-chan?"

The response she got was unexpected.

"That place is dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Because it's full of boys."

"Huh?"

Kanako-chan spoke as though it was a safari park or a zoo. Like, "That place is dangerous because it's full of carnivores."

"Boys will be after you, Yumi-sama."

See, like that.

"Huh?"

"Because you're so cute."

"..."

It was a somewhat baffling explanation. Basically, it went something like this:

Boys schools were full of boys, so they were dangerous. Therefore, she shouldn't go to the Hanadera Academy school festival.

"You're unguarded, Yumi-sama. It may be innocence, but you don't show any wariness when a boy calls out to you. Boys are so dangerous that you always, always, have to be on guard."

Kanako-chan emphasized, clenching her fists tightly.

"So you followed all the boys I came into contact with?"

"Huh?"

"Yesterday, you followed Kashiwagi-san after I split from him at M station, didn't you?"

Yumi asked.

"... I don't know what you're talking about."

"My brother followed you from the train station. He said a tall girl with long hair followed Kashiwagi-san back to his house, then turned around and retraced her steps."

"... Why?"

Kanako-chan turned away and fiddled with her hair.

"Why are you believing some boy's words instead of mine, Yumi-sama?"

"He's not some boy, he's my brother."

Hearing this declaration, Kanako-chan hung her head in shame and muttered almost inaudibly.

"Because I was worried."

"You followed them because you were worried? Were you also watching me because you were worried?"

Kanako-chan didn't respond to Yumi's question. Her silence proving that the student with the long hair in the background of Tsutako-san's photos was her after all, it wasn't a coincidence nor was it a case of mistaken identity.

"A while ago, you followed members of the Hanadera Academy student council too, didn't you?"

"How could I allow it? That ... that tranny was clinging to you. Ambushing you at the Lillian's school gates."

Turning defiant, Kanako-chan resorted to harsh language.

"Don't call him that."

"But he is a tranny. Weak as he may be, it doesn't change the fact that he's male."

Hearing her spit this out, Yumi finally realized. That Kanako-chan just might –

"Do you not like men?"

"I hate them. They're the worst animals of all."

Given this declaration, it seemed Kanako-chan really did hate men.

Kanako-chan apparently had the same hatred of men as Sachiko-sama.

No, hold on.

In the face of Kanako-chan's outright loathing of men, Sachiko-sama's "man hatred" didn't really stack up.

Perhaps what Sachiko-sama had was closer to a "man phobia." She froze up whenever one approached her unawares, but she definitely didn't see men as the enemy. She just wasn't inoculated against them and panicked sometimes.

"I'm sure there are some horrible men, but they're not all like that."

"Maybe not, but the vast majority are."

Kanako-chan asserted confidently. This seemed to be quite ingrained.

"But still, men and women, we're all human – you should have learned this during health class. Even you must have a father, right?"

"I do not."

"Uh ... o-okay."

"That man is no father."

"\_"

Every family had its own circumstances so she didn't want to pry too much.

Hating men in and of itself meant there must be a reason behind it. Whereas it usually didn't require a reason to like them – wait, who was it that said that?

"But Kanako-chan."

Roughly half of all humanity were men, so if she rejected them entirely she was narrowing her own world. Of course, Yumi wasn't about to say she should force herself to like them. But it was a bit sad that Kanako-chan would just cast them aside "because they're men." She was much, much more pitiable than all the men she'd cast aside up until now, and all those she'd cast aside in the future.

"You too, you're going to stand up for men, are you Yumi-sama?"

Kanako-chan laughed coldly.

At that point Yumi thought that perhaps Kanako-chan was transferring her anger against someone else onto her. The way Kanako-chan said, "You too," stuck in her ears for some reason.

"Yumi-sama. Please, enough already. Arguing about boys just doesn't suit you."

"Doesn't suit me?"

"Right. You have to stay your usual angelic self forever, Yumi-sama. Don't look upon those filthy boys, remain a pure maiden eternally. Smiling in Maria-sama's academy."

Kanako-chan closed her eyes in rapture. However.

"That's impossible."

Yumi spoke clearly.

"Why?"

"I like this school so I'd like to stay here forever. But I'm going to grow older whether I like it or not, and as I grow older all sorts of things will change."

"I'm talking about the present, not the future."

"Even so. I'm my own person, with my own personality. I'm glad that you worry about me, Kanako-chan. But I've said that I'm going to Hanadera, and I can take responsibility for myself, and make judgments appropriate for my age."

"But that's not what I desire."

"Not what you desire ... ?"

It was getting harder to understand what Kanako-chan was talking about. What had she meant by that last remark?

"What I'm looking for is the Rosa Chinensis bud that waits patiently in the greenhouse until the day it blossoms. The perfect, radiant flower that's been provided with water and nutrients and kept at a constant temperature, that's untouched by the cold, open air or insects. When I first saw you, I just knew that you were so pure that you were a fitting embodiment of Lillian's Girls Academy. So, please, stay here and bloom into a beautiful flower. There's absolutely no need for you to look outside."

"I'm not the exemplary person you think I am, Kanako-chan."

More like a dandelion - far more mundane, not particularly rare, and the only thing slightly noteworthy was how easily it could take root.

"It's not just me, I'm sure everyone else looks at you the same way, Yumi-sama. The one fit to be Rosa Chinensis' petit soeur. The one everyone adores ... !"

"But I'm telling you, you're wrong."

"So you've been fooling everyone then?"

"Huh?"

"Because it was you yourself that gave us that impression in the first place. If you say it's wrong, then so be it. But please, act in a manner befitting your image right to the very end. Don't do any rash actions that aren't like you. Don't say such ill-suited words."

After this spray of nonsense, Kanako-chan's face crumpled and large teardrops stained her cheeks. Looking at that tear-stained face, Yumi wondered why Kanako-chan was crying.

Since Yumi was the one under attack.

She was being unilaterally condemned, even though she didn't understand the charges against her

"Please don't betray everyone's expectations."

Kanako-chan shrieked then dashed off. However, the exit was blocked by someone that had appeared unbeknownst to them.

"That's quite the cruel thing you said."

Yumi opened her eyes when she heard that haughty voice. Standing there, like in a dream, was her beloved once-sama.

"You started liking her of your own accord and followed her around. But when you found out she didn't live up to your ideal, you lashed out at her. Did you really think anyone would accept your logic?"

"Onee-sama ... "

From behind her, Yumi couldn't see Kanako-chan's expression. But she'd never seen Sachiko-sama looking as stern as this before and her voice was both filled with anger and completely cold.

"Stop acting so conceited. The world doesn't revolve around you."

Sachiko-sama roared, and Kanako-chan couldn't muster a single word of objection.

Sachiko-sama stepped to the side, allowing enough room for one person to fit past her, and Kanako-chan ran out of the greenhouse.

The stress was suddenly gone from Yumi and she crouched on the ground as her legs gave way.

## Part 6.

"Are you alright?"

Sachiko-sama asked quietly, her hand on Yumi's shoulder.

"Yeah ... or rather, it doesn't feel like this is real yet."





longer as terrifying as a demon's, nor was her voice as cold as ice.

"I received a phone call from Sei-sama last night. She said she was a bit worried and I should keep an eye out for you. As usual, she's on the same wavelength as you."

Sachiko-sama answered Yumi's question of, "Why are you here?" before she could ask it.

"But."

Sei-sama was indeed always helping her. But Sachiko-sama was definitely the person she wanted there the most right at that moment.

"What did she mean when she was talking about things "like me?" I've never really thought about how people view me."

Yumi was still confused so she said what had stuck in her mind. She wanted to understand the situation and sort out her feelings.

"That's for the best, don't you think?"

Sachiko-sama smiled.

"Although it's something I think about from time to time."

"Oh, really?"

"Selfish. Arrogant. Hysterical ... I think I've got a pretty good grasp on my own image."

Sachiko-sama took a few steps over to the flowerbed and gently stroked the Rosa Chinensis bud. It looked to be a little larger and a bit redder than when Tsutako-san had taken the photograph just a few days earlier.

"You should just do what you think, and not consider what's "like you." The end result will be "like you." In your case, Yumi, I think that's for the best."

"Onee-sama ... "

"That girl admired you based on appearances. That may serve as a thin thread to bring people together. But by itself it's weak. It falls a long way short of what you'd call a connection. That's all it was."

Sachiko-sama was saying that how they met wasn't important. What was important was how they forged their bonds after that.

A weak thread was easy to cut. It would inevitably get broken sooner or later. Even if it was repaired it might just get broken again.

"That reminds me, the first thing that drew me to you was when I saw you playing "Ave Maria" on the organ, onee-sama."

Yumi stood up and brushed the dirt from her skirt.

"Right. Appearances are the easiest thing to notice. But the most important things are hidden deep inside, so it can be quite a struggle to reach them."

"Inside?"

"Precisely."

Sachiko-sama held out her hand towards Yumi, and Yumi walked over to her onee-sama's side.

"I like your face, your hair, your voice, your fingertips and all that. But it's not because of your appearance that I like you. What I love is your soul, which moves them all."

Sachiko-sama's hand stroked Yumi's cheek, touched her hair, and gripped her hand before coming to rest on the knot of the tie of her uniform.

"My soul?"

"Yes. The part that can't be seen. If there's anything that's "Yumi-like," don't you think it would be that?"

"And you could find that, onee-sama?"

Yumi wanted Sachiko-sama to answer, to say that she'd unhesitatingly find that precious thing hidden deep inside, that thing that only Yumi had and which made her who she was.

"Of course? Even if I was in a silent world of pitch black, if you were there I'd know instantly, Yumi."

"Uh ... "

"Or ... let's see. Suppose you were involved in some sort of terrible accident, and you were taken to a hospital and wrapped in bandages like an Egyptian mummy, lying in a bed alongside a thousand similar people, I'd still be able to identify you on my first attempt."

"Um, onee-sama, that example's a bit dark."

"I suppose. But that's how certain I am that I wouldn't mistake you."

Like that huh? Suddenly, her strength was gone and the tears started welling up and spilling over. Her onee-sama was holding her hand out, waiting for her and Yumi didn't hesitate in running over to her.

"Onee-sama~"

The switch had been flipped and the tears were coming one after the other with no way to stop them.

However, it wasn't a flood of tears brought about by Kanako-chan's words.

Sachiko-sama had warmed Yumi's heart. That was why there was the stream of tears.

If she really was in a silent world of pitch black, or bandaged like an Egyptian mummy, Yumi didn't know if her onee-sama would actually find her. Somewhere in her heart she knew it was probably impossible.

But even so, those words were what Yumi needed right at that moment. Like ointment applied to a graze, they were the medicine she needed to protect herself from the open air.

"It's alright. I'm here for you, Yumi."

Sachiko-sama stroked Yumi's hair like she were a child, and amazingly her heart steadied. Without wiping away her tears, Yumi buried her head in the warmth of her onee-sama's chest.

When people say, "Everyone," how many people are they talking about?

One hundred? Two hundred? Or even more than that?

She didn't know.

However.

Being liked by everyone wasn't everything.

If there was just one person who felt that way, that was more than enough.

Yumi was thinking of her one and only irreplaceable onee-sama.

# The Hanadera War

## Part 1.

She didn't know if this was the case everywhere, but:

Based on the Hanadera and Lillian's school festivals, the school festival at an all-boys school seemed louder but more tasteless than the one at an all-girls school.

First of all, take the school gate.

The letters on the sign that announced the school festival jutted out over the signboard, reaching over the wall it rested against.

Once inside the grounds, there were signposts that could be called either art or scribblings, and while the trees weren't painted, they were covered with all kinds of ornaments like it was Christmas or Tanabata. But a lot of the things just left her perplexed, wondering, "Why is that there?" Vinyl records, real leather boots, swimming floats, saucepans, hats, dog leashes, etc. All sorts of things up in the trees.

There seemed to be something like a sign-in area near the entrance but everyone was just walking in unchallenged. Inside they saw some middle-aged ladies carrying shopping bags, obviously using the school grounds as a shortcut home from the shops. That sort of openness was something you'd never see at Lillian's Girls Academy.

– So with that, the six members of the Yamayurikai were met at the entrance by Yuuki, Alice and Takada-kun, and escorted into the Hanadera Academy high-school grounds.

But, really, where on earth was this place?

Ninjas handing out fliers, Tarzan running around with a signboard on his back making his trademark roar, some popular anime characters singing a parody of their show's opening theme.

This should definitely be Hanadera Academy, but it felt like they'd slipped into an alternate universe.

All the Hanadera students made an "ohh" sound when they saw the Lillian's Girls Academy uniforms. Applause sprang up from out of nowhere.

"Don't worry. Everyone's been warned not to be impolite to you ladies from Lillian's."

Yuuki explained to Sachiko-sama, who was starting to seize up. He said that if something happened, the student could be suspended or expelled, as well as punishment being levied against the club they belonged to.

Clubs at Hanadera Academy emphasized tradition, with the strong bonds forged between club members lasting beyond graduation, so any student who caused the abolition of a club would be so dishonored that they would never again be able to cross the threshold of Hanadera Academy. Anyone who caused a club to be shutdown would be so ashamed they'd naturally have to drop out of school.

After walking for a little while they came to a fork in the path. Naturally, however, there was no statue of Maria-sama standing there – in front there was a thick grove and a smallish mountain.

"Now then, Yukichi, which way should we take the ladies from Lillian's?"

Takada-kun said loudly, out of the blue.

"Let's see. How about we take the right-hand path going there, and the left-hand path coming back."

Yuuki responded levelly, but his voice was raised too.

"Sounds good, let's go with that."

Even the usually soft voice of Alice joined in.

But why did they have to speak so loudly when they were right next to each other? And in a monotone to boot.

"I get it. You want everyone to hear, right? So neither the Genji or Heishi sides can complain."

Yoshino-san said quietly.

"Ding ding. You're sharp, Yoshino-san."

Alice made a sound like an intercom and pointed his index finger in the air. Apparently even the path that students took to school at Hanadera was split between two factions.

The right-hand path they'd take going there was quite steep. It was built close to the central mountain and undulated, giving it the feel of a mountain trail. A dynamic path with trees close to the edge.

"This would make for great exercise."

Rei-sama said, stepping around a tree stump and climbing the log staircase.

"Is everyone alright? It's like this going there, but the path back is paved and smoother."

When Yuuki said this, all the Yamayurikai members raised their hands in the air and said, "Hooray." However, since they both paths were part of the Hanadera grounds they chose to restrain from more boisterous celebrations like high-fives.

They were right not to be overjoyed.

"But it takes a big detour around the mountain so it's longer."

"... Oh."

The maidens' smiles disappeared when that statement was added.

Incidentally, the short and tough path was Genji, the long and level path was Heishi. Without walking both of them it was hard to tell which one was easier.

"Which way do you usually go, Yuuki-san?"

Shimako-san asked. As expected from the daughter of a mountain temple, she wasn't even slightly short of breath.

"I do the same thing we're all doing today. Go there one way and back the other."

Yuuki was neither Genji nor Heishi. The boy that valued neutrality became the student council president.

"On that note, I take the left-hand path."

Alice said.

"I take the right."

Takada-kun added. Very much like the two of them.

Yumi pondered which route she would take if she went to Hanadera Academy and decided that she'd probably be like Yuuki, taking one path there and the other back. Not because she was imitating her brother. The Fukuzawa siblings were both equally indecisive.

After following the hiking course a little further they finally arrived at the point where it met up with the longer but flatter Heishi path and were once again greeted with the sight of students putting on various performances.

There were students handing out discount tickets to food stalls, handing out packs of tissues with fliers for music acts and plays – all the usual means of attracting customers.

A student in a panda costume was handing out lollipops to little children. When they walked past, he offered one to Yumi, even though she wasn't a kid. The plastic wrapping had indecipherable pink and yellow lettering on it.

"Th-thank-you."

The panda patted her on the head like she was a good girl then went back to the group of kids.

"Even though no-one else is approaching us because of Yuuki-kun's watchful gaze ... such incredible bravery."

Rei-sama spoke with admiration, looking back at the panda.

"Perhaps he was emboldened because we couldn't see his face."

Something well worth considering.

"Even so, why did he only give me one ... ?"

Yumi took a good look at the candy she'd just received. Yuuki laughed and offered his opinion.

"Cos you look the most like a child here, Yumi."

"Wha ... "

Even though Noriko-chan was the youngest. And while she was at it, since she was born in April it made her older than Yoshino-san and Shimako-san, although only by a little.

"It's not so bad. You like sweets, right Yumi? The panda must have realized that."

Sachiko-sama consoled her, but didn't provide much by way of support. Since liking sweets fitted the image of a little child.

"If you don't want it, I'll take it, Yumi."

"No. Because he gave it to me."



Yumi quickly hid it behind her back.

"See."

Sachiko-sama happily said, "You're glad you got it after all, aren't you?" Darn it, she'd been completely played.

Still, since Sachiko-sama was feeling well enough to tease her soeur, it probably meant she was getting somewhat accustomed to the atmosphere. At the very least, it was a good sign.

"Don't eat it while we're walking."

"Oka~y."

Yumi opened her handbag to put the lollipop inside. But just at that moment, she caught sight of a word written on the wrapper.

(Huh.)

Surprised, another word jumped out at her. The yellow characters from the indecipherable text all formed words.

"Mystery Novel Appreciation Society ... ?"

Yumi tilted her head in confusion as she read the words. How on earth were a panda and lollipops related to mystery novels? That was the real mystery.

Be that as it may, she felt like she'd heard something about a mystery novel club somewhere before...

"Yumi."

Her onee-sama called out to her because she had lagged behind, so Yumi quickly stuffed the lollipop in her pocket and ran to catch up.

## Part 2.

The Hanadera Academy's high-school student council room was inside a school building.

It was situated alongside the classrooms, but the entrance was between the toilet block and a staircase, so it was recessed a bit.

The inside was completely different to the meeting room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion that was used by the Lillian's Girls Academy student council.

How best to describe it ... right, everything about it gave the impression of a second-hand store. Basically, there were all sorts of non-student-council items scattered everywhere, with some old wooden desks lined up in the middle of the room.

Even at a casual glance, she was able to confirm the presence of washboards, geta sandals, empty goldfish bowls and broken clocks, amongst other things. It was impossible for an outsider to understand why all those things had been left in this room.

In any case, Kobayashi-kun had been waiting in the student council room, so it wasn't long after their 1:30pm arrival that they started the day's planning meeting between the Yamayurikai and the four Hanadera student council members.

"— So, each of the Roses will be on top of a different tower, and when a challenger reaches the top of the tower you'll ask them a quiz question. If they get the question right you'll attach a sticker to their question sheet. This will run for an hour and a half, from 2 to 3:30. Each of the Roses will have a Hanadera student council member at her side. We'll deal with any problems related to the game, so don't worry about that ... umm, were there any questions?"

Kobyashi-kun asked, surveying the female camp. He was a strange one, his position was that of treasurer, but he kept putting himself forwards so now he'd become something of a chairman.

"No. We'll leave everything up to you Hanadera gents."

The Lillian's side had heard most of this before and nothing stuck out as needing more attention. All three of the Roses seemed a bit relieved when they heard they'd each have their own bodyguard(?).

"Well then, we'll step outside for now, to let the boutons get changed."

After saying this, the boys proceeded out of the room. Alice was last out, after setting out the things for them to change into, but he was still a boy after all so he reluctantly left the room too.

"Would it be better if we left too?"

Shimako-san asked out of courtesy.

"Ah, no."

A petit soeur getting changed in front of her onee-sama. There was no point being embarrassed about it now. Or rather, it was more embarrassing to be embarrassed about it. Although it might be different for Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, who had only been soeurs for three months.

"I'd rather you helped out."

Yoshino-san said, having torn open the dry-cleaning bag and holding out the safety pins contained within for Rei-sama.

"Alright. Is that ... Alice's?"

"Yeah. It's a bit big, isn't it?"

Yoshino-san muttered, holding the trousers up against her Lillian's uniform.

"Hmm. You're not that different in height, but he's a boy. Long legs. Hey, Sachiko, did you bring any safety pins?"

"I did."

Sachiko-sama took two safety pins from her sewing kit and handed them to Rei-sama. Yoshino-san started changing immediately and finally her trouser cuffs were fixed with four safety pins in total – one from Yoshino-san, one from Rei-sama and two from Sachiko-sama.

In other words, the clothes they were getting changed into were Hanadera Academy school uniforms.

The three Roses were guests from the neighboring school, so it was imperative that they wear their school uniform. The three boutons, however, were their

assistants. They'd be looking after their onee-samas, who had to stay atop the towers for an hour and a half, but the contestants might get confused if there were girls in Lillian's uniforms walking around at the bottom of the towers. To prevent that, the compromise they reached was that everyone other than the Roses would be wearing Hanadera Academy uniforms while the game was going on.

The uniforms for the boutons were all spares that the three shorter Hanadera student council members had brought from home (obviously after getting them cleaned). Yoshino-san had Alice's uniform, Noriko-chan had Kobayashi-kun's and naturally enough Yumi had been given her younger brother Yuuki's uniform.

Still, "shorter" was a relative term and it was only in comparison to Takada-kun and the Yakushiji brothers. While Alice did present a slender image, Yuuki and Kobayashi-kun were about average height for male high-school students. In contrast, the three boutons were not particularly tall. They could fit into the borrowed uniforms easily enough, but both the shirt sleeves and trouser legs were too long.

"Even if they just roll up their sleeves, it's still four safety-pins each for the trouser cuffs, are we going to have enough?"

They needed a total of 12 since there were three people needing their trouser legs taken up, which meant eight more. Unfortunately it didn't seem like Yumi, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan had eight safety pins between them.

Inside the pocket-sized sewing kits that the girls brought with them was one safety-pin. They'd expected two. Regrettably, they could only scrape together three safety pins, which wasn't even enough for one person.

"I wonder if we could borrow some from somewhere."

Rei-sama murmured, as Noriko-chan finished changing, quickly folding up the cuffs of her trousers and saying, "I'm fine like this."

Yumi tried to copy her. However.

"It's fine for one person, but having two people next to each other with their trousers rolled up is a bit – "

"Yeah ... "

Going by the reaction of the Roses, they looked quite foolish. If it was simply a matter of looking foolish she would have just endured it. But it would ruin the whole point of wearing the uniforms if they stood out conspicuously.

Reluctantly, Yumi unrolled her trouser legs.

"That damn Yuuki."

At that moment she resented her lanky younger brother who had outgrown her at some point in the past.

"I wonder if I should just sew them up."

It was her brother's uniform, so as long as she undid it afterward it should be fine. The sewing kit contained a needle, thread and scissors.

"But we don't have time for that."

Yoshino-san said, looking at the clock.

"It could have been done in the time it took you to say that."

Rei-sama, the home economics maestro, snapped open her own sewing kit.

"You can't do it while she's still wearing it. Yumi-san would have to get changed again. You have to include that in the time it takes."

"Ah, right. But still."

The Yellow Rose soeurs ignored Yumi as they launched into an argument about, "There's no time," "Yes there is."

"This wouldn't be a problem if you were wearing high heels. But they probably don't have those in a boys school ... "

Sachiko-sama said to herself, perhaps as a joke, as she inspected the excess trouser length.

"High heels?"

Yumi had a flash of inspiration when she heard her onee-sama's words, and raced over to a pile of odds and ends.

"Here. I'll borrow these."

What she'd retrieved was a completely ordinary pair of men's geta sandals.

Having found something suitable, she promptly took off her socks and tried them on. There was no problem height-wise. They made a clip-clop sound as she

walked but apart from that they were fine. And her sudden growth gave her a new perspective which put her in high spirits.

While all this was going on, Yoshino-san had coiled up her long braids into buns. They weren't trying to disguise themselves as Hanadera students, but just having her long hair moving about might be distracting.

"Noriko-chan should be fine as she is ... what about you, Yumi? Do you want to wear your hair down?"

"I suppose I should."

Her ribbons might attract attention too, which was no good. So with that, she untied her trademark twin ribbons. But her hair already had weird kinks in it, since it had been tied up all morning. They were stubborn enough that they'd have to be brushed out.

"Do you want to wet it?"

"But they don't have a hairdryer, right?"

"... Doesn't look like it."

Even though they had a washboard, mortar and pestle, a bonsai pine tree, a mask from some Asian country and a teddy bear, they didn't have what she needed right then – a hairdryer.

"Oh, that's right. You brought a hand towel, didn't you, Yumi?"

"Uh, yeah."

Her onee-sama asked her to hand it over, which she did, then Sachiko-sama spread it over Yumi's head.

"A turban? Or a headscarf?"

Either one would be bad enough to make her run away, but before she could do anything the sides of the hand-towel had been pulled around from the front and tied tightly behind her neck.

"Ah, that looks good."

"It matches the geta sandals."

At the unexpectedly positive response, Yumi took out her hand mirror and had a look. Which led to:

"Th-this ... "

Was some kind of pseudo-pirate. Well, it most resembled the style adopted by her father whenever they did a spring clean of the Fukuzawa house, but that wasn't a particularly well known example and the only one that would have understood it was her brother, on the opposite side of the door.

But this was probably a pretty good idea. With the hand-towel covering everything, none of her crinkly hair was visible. – So with that, Yumi decided to go with it. As a result, all three boutons had completed their metamorphosis.

"Whoa. Yumi-san, you look just like Yukichi."

Kobayashi-kun pointed and laughed upon his return, having been informed that they had finished changing.

"What? Don't say that."

The Fukuzawa siblings objected in unison.

"Just bear with it for an hour and a half."

She didn't have particularly good hearing but she still managed to hear someone say, "Not just their looks but what they say too," so it looked like they'd become a laughing stock.

"Anyway, how did you get all these scratches on your uniform?"

Yumi conducted a closer inspection of her brother's uniform as she put the lollipop she'd received from the panda into a pocket.

Alice's uniform, which was probably about the same age, was impeccably clean. Kobayashi-kun's wasn't as good as Alice's, but it wasn't as bad as Yuuki's.

"Stow it. It's better than this one."

Yuuki held out his left arm, showing a rip about a third of the way up the sleeve that dangled open like a gaping mouth.

"Wh-what happened?"

"Being student council president's a test of strength. Now, it's about time we headed out to the oval."

Her brother checked his watch and quickly turned around. Yumi was a bit concerned for him, but then Alice tapped her on the shoulder.

"It's because Yukichi's energetic, unlike me."

"Energetic?"

"Yeah. He's always running around the school. Because he's the student council president, and because he's not the type to worry about being overly dignified, he's always on the go. There's all sorts of tight corners and he's always watching out for others first. And although it's not often, there probably are times when he has to get physical to make some students listen to him. So his uniform gets tattered quickly."

"Hmm."

She felt like she'd got a glimpse at a side of her brother that she didn't see at home. It seemed unbelievable that he'd get physical with anyone. But apparently Yuuki put up a strong front away from home.

"Hey, who left this box in the doorway?"

The tough guy shouted when he opened the door.

"Oh, when did that happen? It wasn't there a moment ago."

Yumi and the rest of the Yamayurikai followed the Hanadera student council members out into the hallway. When they did, they saw a huge cardboard box had been left near the club room entrance. It was a cube about 70cm along each side. Neatly painted in light brown. They surely would have noticed it earlier if it had been there for a while.

"It could be a prop for a play, or part of some display, I guess. Something might have happened while they were carrying it, so they left it here."

Takada-kun said as he moved it aside. They were next to a staircase, so people probably did leave things there for a little while from time to time.

"Still, putting it right in front of the student council room's door? Even if you were coming right back, you wouldn't put it there."

"And it'd have some kind of label on it if they were delivering it to the student council."

"I don't remember ordering any empty boxes."

"Empty?"

"Yeah, empty."

"... It could have been intentionally abandoned."

"I guess there are some idiots who'd make that gamble."



"Of course there are. But if they were looking to pick a fight, a single box is a bit weak."

The boys crowded around the box and voiced their opinions. But since the people who left it there weren't present, all they could do was speculate.

"Still, just dumping it here is outrageous. I'll put up a warning saying that there will be consequences if it's not moved in 30 minutes."

Yuuki pulled some paper and a thick marker from somewhere, quickly wrote out some sentences and taped it in a prominent position.

*Warning!*

*This box will be disposed of if it's not removed within thirty minutes.*

*If it happens again, the owner should be prepared for an appropriate punishment.*

*1:45pm, Hanadera Academy student council president, Fukuzawa Yuuki.*

"There, that'll do. Alright, let's go."

He started walking, as though nothing had happened. Having watched the series of events unfold, the Yamayurikai members silently exchanged glances.

– Boys were, in some ways, incredible.

## Part 3.

In the middle of the oval there were three towers, one red, one white and one yellow. Surrounding them was a great crowd of participants, all apparently male students, impatiently waiting for the start. Some were in school uniforms, some in gym clothes, some in their club uniforms, some wearing cosplay – it wasn't just the towers that were colorful but also the people surrounding them.

When they saw the Lillian's school uniforms, the boys quickly stepped aside, clearing a path. Adhering to the warnings about being polite.

The towers looked more like playground slides than towers. Each one had a side that angled down from the peak to the ground. A ladder was attached on the opposite side, in a corner.

"Don't tell me we have to climb those ladders ... !?"

It wasn't just Sachiko-sama that was taken aback by the sight of the towers but also Shimako-san.

The tall platforms constructed from timber were as high as the roof of a one-story building, although they looked a little bit lower to Yumi. But despite being a bit lower than she'd expected, they were still over two metres tall. Just getting up there would be a challenge for someone not used to climbing ladders.

"Don't worry, we'll use the ladders but we've prepared a staircase for you ladies to use. Although there's only one, so you'll have to take it in turns going up."

At Yuuki's signal, some students that were apparently helping with the event brought out a staircase attached to a cart. It was similar to the stair cars they had at airports, although the staircase had apparently come from the library archive where it was used to reach books that were up high.

"I'll go first then. Excuse me, can you push that up against the yellow tower?"

Rei-sama wouldn't have had a problem with the ladder, but being cognizant of her skirt she decided to use the mobile staircase. She quickly climbed the staircase and stood atop the yellow tower.

The staircase was moved from the yellow tower to the white one. Shimako-san was very ladylike as she carefully trod up the stairs.

Last place was Sachiko-sama, but she still looked a bit uncertain – even when the staircase was wheeled before her she just stood stock still in front of the red tower.

"Onnee-sama, I'll – "

"Yumi. I told you already, I'm fine."

Sachiko-sama glared at her, even though she hadn't yet said, "go up there in your place."

"Yes. No, I just wanted to go up there and have a little look. Is that okay?"

"On top of the tower?"

"Yes. I want to see what it feels like."

"... I suppose I can't stop you."

"But I'm a bit scared, so can you go up there with me, onnee-sama?"

Yumi took Sachiko-sama's hand and guided her over to the staircase. Sachiko-sama didn't show any sign of fear, whether it was because she was relieved someone else was going with her, or because she didn't want to appear weak in front of her petit soeur, and before long she was standing on top of the tower.

The tower was about three tatami mats in size (1.8m x 2.7m) and the view was amazing. They could see the gymnasium next to the oval and all the way over to the school buildings.

The wind was incredibly soothing. She thought of taking to the wind in flight, like a bird or an insect.

"Ah, this must be your seat over here, onnee-sama."

There was a single chair on top of the tower, facing towards the slide section.

"It's sturdy, so it should be fine."

Yumi sat on it first, to make sure it was safe for her onnee-sama. The chair was fastened to the tower. As long as the tower didn't collapse, she wouldn't have to worry about falling if she was seated there.

"I suppose."

Sachiko-sama switched places with Yumi and sat down on the chair. By slightly lowering her line of sight, she couldn't see the ground directly and her stiff facial expression softened somewhat.

"Hey, Yumi."

Yuuki arrived atop the tower, having climbed the ladder.

"Are you going to stay up here forever? I want to move the staircase out of the way."

"I guess it is a bit small for three people up here."

In truth, she wanted to stay by Sachiko-sama's side the entire time. It wasn't that she doubted Yuuki's ability as a bodyguard, but Yumi held the conceit that, "If I'm here, onee-sama will have 100 times more courage."

"It's not so bad with three people, but when the game starts there'll be another one too."

Yuuki said, scratching his head.

"The challengers will climb this slide and when they arrive they'll stand there and be asked a quiz question."

The spot he indicated was right where Yumi was currently standing. In a 30cm x 30cm square marked off with red tape.

"Sachiko-san will sit there, so what about you and me, Yumi? It's not a huge space for the three of us but, well, it'll be fine."

Yuuki had given her permission but Yumi thought there was bound to be a lot of action once the game started so it seemed like a waste of space to have her there just as a companion. But she couldn't bring herself to abandon Sachiko-sama here either.

"I'll just watch the start. I'll climb down once I see how it is."

When she'd determined that Sachiko-sama was accustomed to both the height and the game.

"The staircase would just get in the way once the event starts, so it's going to be moved away."



"You'll climb down the ladder!?"

Yuuki and Sachiko-sama both asked simultaneously.

"Don't worry, I'm not wearing a skirt."

"That was the only problem for you, Yumi?"

"Mmm."

Yumi replayed what she'd said in her mind and still thought she wouldn't want to climb down the ladder in a skirt because someone might look up it.

"You're incredible. I couldn't climb down a ladder from this height no matter what."

Sachiko-sama spoke from the bottom of her heart. So that's it, it had been a problem with the height.

"Well, if you say you can, Yumi, I'm sure you can."

Yuuki gave a signal to below and the staircase was separated from the tower. Surveying the scene, at some point Takada-kun had made it to the top of the white tower and Kobayashi-kun the yellow tower.

"We're about to start, Sachiko-san."

Yuuki checked his watch then exchanged glances with his comrades atop the white and yellow towers. Seeing them nod back, Yuuki cupped his hands around his mouth and loudly proclaimed:

"Let the Hanadera war's second stage, the battle for Lillian, begin."

Since he'd said the "second stage," that must have meant that the first battle had already taken place. Yumi idly wondered if there were also third and fourth stages too.

Out of nowhere came the sound of someone blowing on a conch shell, and with that as the signal the participants rushed over to the slide.

(Oowah.)

Sachiko-sama probably couldn't see the situation from where she was sitting but if she stood up and looked at the ground she'd instinctively want to run away from the unfolding spectacle. Like the great migration of wildebeest, or a massive crowd of ants swarming around sugar. At any rate, it was a messy turmoil.

"Yu-yumi."

Sachiko-sama called out for her help, frightened by the roar that seemed to come from the depths of the earth. The combination of war-cries with various other noises mixed in closely resembled the sound from the battle scenes she'd seen on the TV show Big River Drama.

"It's alright, onee-sama."

Yumi knelt beside the chair and grasped Sachiko-sama's hands. The Roses' real job started when the first animal, uh, human, arrived atop the tower. But no challenger had yet made it to the top of either the red, white or yellow towers.

That was probably because the three slides were not ordinary slides.

The yellow slide was smeared in a syrup that looked like mustard, making it hard to climb because the boys kept losing their footing.

The white slide was only covered in flour, so it looked to be easier to climb, but there was an obstacle before the slide. They had to fish a toffee out of a container covered in flour using their mouth before they could climb the tower.

Finally, the red tower that they were on was built with the slide a bit steeper than the others and a single straw rope dangling from the top of the tower. Initially Yumi had wondered why their tower was the only one not coated in something of the respective color, but she understood after seeing the first challengers. The palms of their hands where they were grasping the straw rope were turning bright red. On top of that, blood was running from a cut on the face of the frontrunner, probably suffered in the melee for the rope.

"Ah, you've made it to the top, Ishiguro-kun from the gymnastics club. Which quiz question do you want, from 1 to 100?"

Yuuki asked the out of breath challenger, pointing at a cookie tin. The tin contained 100 numbered cards with the quiz questions written on them.

"Number one!"

Ishiguro-kun of the gymnastics club screamed with all his might.

"Number one ... sorry, that's a miss. Come back and try again. Exit's over there."

Card number one, with the word "Miss!" written on it in large lettering, was unceremoniously tossed in the bin.

"God damn it!"

The poor lad who'd drawn a miss despite being the first person to arrive slid down the narrow section of slide with "exit" written on it. She watched him leave out of the corner of her eye as the second challenger hauled themselves up the straw rope and onto the platform.

"Well then, next challenger. Which number do you want?"

"Lucky number seven."

"Number seven. Look at that, it really is lucky. There's a question. Here I go. Which element has atomic number seven?"

"Um ... I'll be back."

The second challenger then launched himself down the exit slide. Apparently his specialty was humanities rather than science.

It soon became apparent that the questions were divided into a number of categories, like, "What's the title of the monk Shinran's most renowned piece?" or, "What are the five fundamental seasonings used in Japanese cooking?" or, "What's the name of the classical literature teacher Mr Suzuki's wife?" or, "What's  $9 \times 7$ ?"

About two or three of every 10 contestants would draw a card that matched their field of expertise and get the right answer. There were plenty of miss cards mixed in there too.

Before long, they'd had about thirty participants climb up the slide, nominate a number, then either answer the question or leave without responding. By this time, Sachiko-sama had become pretty much accustomed to it, smoothly congratulating the successful challengers and adding a sticker to their question sheets and commiserating with the unsuccessful ones.

When there was a little break in the line of challengers, Sachiko-sama opened the small bag she'd brought with her and stuck her hand inside, feeling around.

"What are you looking for?"

Yumi asked.

"My moist towel ... but it's okay. It must be in my school bag in the student council room."

"Then I'll go get it."



Sachiko-sama had a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead and the nape of her neck.

"Ah, Yumi. You don't have to go. I've got a handkerchief."

"Just wait a little while. I'll be right back."

Sachiko-sama grabbed her arm to stop her but Yumi gently freed herself from Sachiko-sama's hand. The game had been going for about half an hour. Yumi had been thinking it was about time she withdrew anyway.

"Yumi. Put your sandals into this bucket and go down barefoot, it'll be safer."

"Ah, right."

Following Yuuki's directions, Yumi took off her geta sandals and tossed them in the indicated bucket. The bucket was attached to a piece of rope that was as tall as the tower and tied around the top rung of the ladder, making it a mechanism for transferring small items to or from the tower.

"Then you can put Sachiko-san's stuff in there and give me a yell and I'll pull it up."

"Got it."

She descended the ladder barefoot, then as she was putting on the sandals that had arrived ahead of her she saw Yoshino-san walking past the red tower.

"Yoshino-san?"

"Ah, Yumi-san. I got a message in the bucket saying Rei-chan was thirsty, so I've just got back from buying her some juice."

Yoshino-san smiled, carrying three cool drinks – a sports drink, an orange juice and a can of coffee.

"So where are you off to, Yumi-san?"

"I'm making a dash to the student council room to get Sachiko-sama's moist towel."

"We've both got it tough. Later."

Yoshino-san ran off towards the yellow tower, muttering, "Hurry, hurry."

Yumi turned and watched her for a little while, as Yoshino-san put the juice into the bucket which was pulled up by Kobayashi-kun.

Yumi turned her gaze to the white tower, wondering what was happening there, and saw Noriko-chan at the base of the tower worriedly looking up at the top. Shimako-san looked to be so busy she didn't have time to think about requesting something from her petit soeur.

It was tough being told to do something, and tough having nothing to do.

The bouton's task was quite a burden indeed.

The brown cardboard box they'd seen on their way out was still in front of the door. The time limit was already up but Yuuki and the other student council members hadn't returned yet so it hadn't been disposed of.

"A~lice."

She called out in a sing-song voice as she entered the room, and Alice lifted his gaze from the desk and the paperwork he'd been doing.

"Yumi-san. Oh, what's the matter?"

"Forgot something. Where's Sachiko-sama's bag ... ah, here it is."

The fastidious Sachiko-sama's bag was as organized as ever, so it didn't take long to find what she was after. A moist towel the size of a handkerchief inside a plastic bag. During summer, her onee-sama would often carry this to cool herself down. Although it was autumn according to the calendar, there were still plenty of hot days so she'd be making use of it for a little while longer.

"How's the game going?"

Alice asked.

"It's really pumping."

Yumi gave him a thumbs-up.

"Really? That's good. I've been really busy here too. Even though missing children, broadcasting and lost property are all handled in other places, it all seems to flow here for some reason. It's finally calmed down a bit now, but the student council room's advertised as the emergency contact point so someone has to stay here and man it. And when there's a crowd, people will stop in for a look. Who wants to look at a rundown store?"

Alice laughed. Yumi wasn't sure whether his analogy was correct or not, but thought that, strangely enough, it might be.

"There's only fifty minutes left. Tell Sachiko-sama to give it her best."

"Yep. You keep up the good work here too, Alice."

They waved farewell and Yumi departed. Sachiko-sama was waiting for her so she didn't have time to have a leisurely chat with Alice. Straight there and straight back.

As she was walking out of the student council room and about to descend the stairs, Yumi's eye suddenly stopped on a faucet near the toilet block.

"Ah, it'd probably be better if I wet it again."

The towelette had turned lukewarm while it was sitting inside Sachiko-sama's bag.

She wanted to make her onee-sama feel just that little bit more comfortable. Such was the spirit of the petit soeur. So with that, she turned back, took the towel out of the plastic bag and rinsed it beneath the faucet.

The water from the tap was cooler and more refreshing than she'd expected. After washing and gently wringing the hand towel, Yumi put it back into its plastic bag and just as she was about to leave someone called out to her from behind.

"Hey, Fukuzawa."

"Huh?"

When she turned around, there were four unknown high-school boys standing there blocking her path.

They weren't making a good impression on Yumi with the way they were acting. She tried to head back to the student council room but two of them quickly blocked the doorway, and just like that they'd encircled her front and back.

When she went right, they went right. When she went left, they went left. They followed her movements exactly, like this was a basketball match and she was being marked by the opposite team.

"H-"

She wanted to yell, "Help," but her voice failed her. The ring encircling Yumi slowly constricted.

Yumi tried to bulldoze her way through, because she'd be caught if this kept up. Aiming between the two in front of her, Yumi dashed past them.

"Oh, hold on now."

Just as she thought she'd slipped through, her wrist was grasped tightly.

"Gag 'im."

Three of them held her arms and legs as her mouth was gagged with duct tape. She struggled but it was four on one. Moreover, the four were all boys.

(Cowards.)

Her eyes were covered with an eye mask and her arms and legs were bound with something like rope, then she felt herself being lifted up and dumped into a confined space.

(Box?)

Just as she realized it was the brown box, she heard them say, "One, two," and felt herself being lifted up.

(W-where are they taking me!?)

She tried slamming her body against the box, but it was sealed tightly and didn't open.

"Don't struggle."

The box was thumped from the outside and little by little the terror grew within Yumi.

(That place is dangerous.)

She heard Kanako-chan's voice in her memory.

(You're unguarded, Yumi-sama. Boys are so dangerous that you always, always, have to be on guard.)

She now understood that completely, so no need to blame her any further, Kanako-chan. But it was far too late to reflect on that now, so she'd be better off thinking up a counter-plan.

(He said Fukuzawa, didn't he?)

It seemed as though the boys were acting this recklessly because they knew her. But this was the first time Yumi had ever seen them, and she had absolutely no idea what she could have done to deserve such appalling treatment.

(So maybe.)

Even if they had nothing against Yumi as an individual, they might be carrying this out as an attack against Lillian's Girls Academy –

(Yuuki, you idiot.)

He'd been pressuring everyone not to be rude to the Lillian's girls and this was the backlash.

Since their behavior was nothing if not rude.

(Brilliant leadership from the Hanadera Academy high school student council president. Moron!)

Switching locations to that Yuuki.

He felt a tingle in his spine and looked around. But it wasn't the feeling of a sudden gust of wind.

That said, it wasn't sensation of being watched, like Alice and Kobayashi, either.

His best guess was it felt like someone was insulting him behind his back. No, it was as though someone was badmouthing him terribly.

But in that case, there were far too many candidates for him to have a clue about who it was. Fukuzawa Yuuki had a lot of enemies.

"Has Yumi returned by any chance?"

Sachiko-san asked quietly, at his side.

"No. The bucket's empty."

Yuuki answered, reeling in the cord attached to the bucket. Yumi was supposed to put Sachiko-san's stuff into the bucket when she returned from the student council room, then he'd pull it up.

"Don't you think she's taking too long?"

"I suppose – "

Yuuki checked his watch. Yumi had climbed down from the tower 15 minutes ago. Estimating about five minutes one-way for the trip, she should at least be somewhere in view by now.

They'd already been through a couple of rounds of the game, and the repeat contestants were losing some of their initial enthusiasm. As evidence of that, there was a growing pile of bodies on the mat below belonging to challengers that won the struggle for the rope but fell off while climbing up – unable to put any strength into their raw and injured hands.

From time to time some participants who'd arrived late, or taken a bit of a breather, would climb up the slide but business was currently slow on top of the tower.

There was a bit of a lull in the game. Not just atop the red tower, the white and yellow towers were pretty much the same.

"She might be deep in conversation with Alice."

Yuuki said. As a response to the earlier comment about Yumi taking too long.

"Yumi's not the sort of girl to do that, since she went there on an errand for me."

Sachiko-san seemed to be massively over-estimating Yumi. Either that, or Yumi turned into an incredibly good girl when she was in front of Sachiko-san.

"Then I guess she might have got lost. She can be a bit scatterbrained sometimes."

"But that's terrible!"

On top of which, she's overly protective? There was a lot about Sachiko-san's life that Yuuki didn't know, but there was a lot that was interesting in how she was behaving.

"But as long as she's somewhere in the area, she'd only have to ask one of our students where the oval was and she'd get here soon enough ... "

He'd intended to convey that there was no need to worry, but instead it seemed to deepen Sachiko-san's uneasiness. She raised her eyes.

"And yet she's not here, so what's going on!?"

"Calm down, Sachiko-san."

"Don't tell me ... she's had an accident."

"An accident at school? Like a chemistry class experiment gone wrong?"

He said, as a joke.

"Exactly!? Where's the science lab? Is it in the same building as the student council room?"

Sachiko-san erupted from her chair. But then she became aware of the height of the tower, which she'd completely forgotten about, and shakily sat back down in the chair again.

"You were the one that said something about an accident, Sachiko-san. Not me."

Yuuki said, squatting down beside her chair. Sachiko-san bit-down on her white handkerchief and responded with:

"Go and look for her, Yuuki-san."

"Huh!?"

"I'll manage up here by myself. It's just reading out the question and giving a sticker to those who answer correctly, right? ... Yes, I can do that."

"No way. I can't leave you up here by yourself, Sachiko-san. For one thing, we don't even know if Yumi's been in an accident."

"You're her brother, aren't you? Don't you cherish her?"

"Sachiko-san, you're talking nonsense."

"Listen, you have to go and search for her. Can't you hear what I'm saying?"

It was like she was a different person saying this, with a self-assurance that showed she was undoubtedly "Sachiko-sama." Hearing this authoritative tone of voice, anyone would just instinctively answer, "Yes," as though by magic.

" – I guess I don't have a choice. Okay, just wait a moment."

Yuuki had a look down from the tower, searching for someone suitable. Luckily, his eyes were drawn to a giant standing beside the white tower, so he waved and called out:

"Nikkou-senpai!"

"Oh, Yukichi."

"Can you come here for a minute?"

There had only been one of them when he'd called out but the other appeared from somewhere and they both lumbered over to the red tower. The two seniors, Nikkou and Gakkou, Yakushiji Akimitu and Tomomitsu – twins.

"If you're alright with that, we'll swap places. It's the only way I'll be able to go."

Yuuki pointed at the ground.

"... Fine."

Sachiko-san rose slightly from her chair to see what "that" was and reluctantly agreed.



Yumi was bound to show up at some point, saying, "Sorry I'm late," but it was good that Sachiko-san could get so worried about her.

"What is it, Yukichi?"

"Anything you want us to do?"

After the two seniors had climbed the tower, Yuuki briefly explained the situation to them and asked them to take his place, which they quickly agreed to.

At any rate, with the addition of those two large bodies, the top of the tower suddenly felt rather cramped. Oppressive even. Even Sachiko-san seemed a bit nervous.

"Read out the question for the number they ask."

"If they get it right, attach a sticker to the card."

The two seniors seemed to be enjoying themselves, running their hands through the box containing the numbered cards and checking out the stack of stickers.

"Rosa Chinensis will attach the stickers, so you don't have to senpai."

"What, we don't have to attach the stickers?"

"Right."

Yuuki still had a few misgivings, but this was a student council event so he couldn't leave it up to an outsider, and these two were perfect as bodyguards. But above all, it was vital that it was someone that Sachiko-san already knew.

"Yukichi's going to the toilet."

"Something big, huh."

Nikkou and Gakkou came up with their own interpretation. They usually didn't listen properly to what other people were saying.

"... Look, think whatever you want."

He didn't have time to correct their mistake. Yuuki put his foot on the ladder and started climbing down.

As he was leaving, someone made it up to the top of the red tower for the first time in a while. The sound of someone shouting out "Number 18" echoed overhead.

"Question. The top is a wood processing area, the bottom is a dump site. What is it?"

"Uh. No way. Why'd I have to get such a tough question?"

(Tough question? It's a pretty simple riddle.)

While this was going on, Yuuki kept moving one foot after the other and eventually made it to the ground.

– Incidentally, the answer was "a pencil sharpener."

## Part 4.

Yuuki made it to the student council room in three minutes, running all the way.

The school grounds were lively, just like a regular festival. Students, teachers, parents, and other visitors with no connection to Hanadera were all going a little bit wild, enjoying themselves and making noise.

The gymnasium and auditorium were used for the big events but each classroom also held something, like a haunted house, a mini-theater, cafe or refreshment booth, or some kind of display.

He'd taken the shortest path between the oval and the student council room and no classroom had stood out as being too overcrowded, nor had there been any large gatherings in the hallway. But despite this, he hadn't spotted Yumi on the way over. Although there were a number of staircases, and the emergency exits were open today too, so she may have taken a different path.

"Wh-what's the matter, Yukichi? The event hasn't finished yet, right?"

Yuuki opened the door and went into the student council room. Alice looked surprised by the sight and rushed over.

"Sachiko-san's worried about Yumi. She told me I had to look for her, so I got Nikkou and Gakkou to cover for me and came over. Has Yumi stopped by yet?"

"Yumi-san? Yeah – "

Alice frowned as he muttered this.

"But that was a fair while ago now. She isn't back yet?"

"How long ago?"

"Well, she would have left here about 2:40. I'm pretty sure of that because I called out something like, "Fifty minutes left, good luck.""

"What?"

Yuuki checked his watch. 3pm.

He'd climbed down from the tower at about 2:55, so from those numbers Yumi had been unable to make a five minute one-way trip in fifteen minutes.

"I guess she must have got lost after all. I'll try taking a different path back to the oval. We may have just missed each other. Alice, continue to stay on alert in here. If Yumi comes back, keep her here ... Alice?"

"Ah, right."

Alice agreed, a bit absentmindedly. Yuuki may have just been imagining it, but it seemed as though Alice's face had grown progressively paler.

"Do you remember something?"

"Nuh-uh."

Despite initially denying it, it seemed as though Alice couldn't lay his suspicions entirely to rest as he said, "But there was that one thing."

"What thing?"

Yuuki grabbed Alice's shoulders and shook him.

"Ah, well. A little while after Yumi-san left, there was a commotion out in the hallway so I stuck my head out the door to take a look. When I did, I saw some guys carrying away that box from before ... that's all it was."

"The box!?"

Yuuki dashed out of the student council room.

Indeed, the cardboard box that had been in the doorway was no longer there.

"... The box, huh."

But still, there was no grounds to suggest that the removal of the box was somehow related to Yumi's disappearance. It seemed more likely that the owner of the box had seen the note about the penalty, got scared, and quickly removed it.

Yuuki crouched down and examined the spot where the box had been. It looked as though that patch of floor was the only one where the thin layer of dust had been violently disturbed. But he may have just been seeing that because of what he was thinking. It could have been traces from when the box was moved.

"Alice, earlier you said there was a commotion so you poked your head out the door. Were they making a fuss even though they were moving the box?"

Yuuki asked, increasingly concerned about what happened at that time.

"Initially I thought there was a fight, because I heard what sounded like some thumps. Then I heard, "One, two," which would have been them readying to lift the box."

"Readying to lift the box? How many people were carrying it?"

"Three ... no, four ... ?"

"For an empty box?"

Cardboard boxes were sturdy, but they were still just made of paper. There was no way they would have needed four people to carry it. Unless there was something inside.

Something inside – ?

"They couldn't have ... "

Alice gasped, covering his mouth with his hand.

"They may very well have done just that."

Yuuki muttered in despair, picking up something that had tumbled to the edge of the hallway.

"There's no way Yumi would carelessly drop something that was too precious to give to Sachiko-san ... It must have fallen from her pocket when she defended herself."

Yuuki gripped it tightly. It was the lollipop that the panda had given to Yumi.

"You thought I was Yuuki!?"

These were the first words out of Yumi's mouth after the adhesive tape had been removed and she was free to talk.

"I'm so sorry. Truly, I can't say how sorry I am."

The four students all stood in a row and bowed simultaneously. When they'd crowded around her outside of the student council room, she thought they'd looked scary, but seeing them like this they just looked timid and thoughtless, like normal boys.

"Well, you've got Fukuzawa-kun's ... trademark uniform on."

(You can call it tattered.)

"And you're about the same height."

(Because the geta sandals add some height. If you looked, you would have noticed.)

"And your face is exactly the same."

(Because we've got the same parents.)

"Plus your brother often wraps a hand towel around his head like that."

(Now that I did not know.)

Despite the apology, they listlessly offered up their explanations, with Yumi making a mental retort against each of them.

"— Even so."

"I know. Even with all this, it's not something that can easily be forgiven."

Basically, it was like this:

The hunters had turned pale the moment they inspected their prey after bringing it back to their nest. Because what they'd expected to be an ordinary raccoon turned out to be an endangered red panda. — That's pretty much what happened. Figuratively speaking.

They were in the nest, or, rather, the mystery novel appreciation society's display space. Yumi wasn't sure how far away from the student council room it was,

since she'd been carried here in a cardboard box, but it was obviously a part of the school building. The two rooms may not have even been all that far apart. Although it had taken them a fair while to get here, since they'd been carrying a heavy cargo (Yumi).

"Didn't you know that Yuuki would be at the event, not in the student council room?"

"We knew. That's why we were confused at first. But it was a rare opportunity. So we hurriedly changed our plans."

"You changed your plans?"

"Yeah."

He said that their initial plan was to target Alice, who was staying behind. But like Alice had said, there had been a steady stream of visitors going into the student council room so they couldn't find a time when he was alone. But then Yuuki appeared and they decided that the student council president would have more of an impact than the secretary. – That's more or less a summary of what he said.

"But, why? Why did the mystery novel club have to kidnap someone from the student council?"

Yumi asked, sitting down on the seat she was offered. The two floor pillows were like a complete 180 from when she'd been in the cardboard box.

"There's a deep and meaningless reason for that."

"Not "meaningful?""

Not only was it for a meaningless reason but they'd got the wrong person. – As she listened to them talk, Yumi gradually started to pity them.

Besides, hadn't the mystery novel society been the one that gave her that lollipop? Or were the panda and the candy somehow related to this kidnapping too? Geeze, stop ruining little children's dreams already.

"It's to do with our mystery novel appreciation society. It used to be a fully-fledged club. But due to declining youth literacy and other such things, the number of members has dropped remarkably, to the point where there's only eight club members at present ... ah, since we're a society, I probably shouldn't say club members."

The boy in glasses, who looked to be the leader, laughed self-deprecatingly. Since they were a society, he should probably be called the society president instead of club president.

"But there's only four of you here? Where are the others? Handing out candy?"

"No. The other four are also members of other clubs. They're basically only members on paper, lending us their names. One of our graduated seniors volunteered to hand out candy."

That kindhearted graduate was probably still out there in the panda suit handing out lollies, unaware of the mess his juniors had made. – Poor guy.

"This year, the animation appreciation society was promoted to "club" status, our clubroom was snatched from us, and we didn't receive any budget from the school. The space we were allocated was half a classroom. Half."

They seemed to want someone to listen to their complaints even if there was nothing they could do about them. So they told them to Yumi.

"Half a classroom, huh."

Certainly, the place was pretty small for a classroom. From looking up at the ceiling, she could see that the room had been divided in half by the lockers.

That said, the size didn't seem completely inappropriate. It seemed a good amount of space for the number of items they had on display and the number of visitors they had. And yet, they were insisting that this wasn't the case. So the main problem was one of pride.

"So, what, you thought you'd kidnap someone from the student council because you were annoyed at how small the room is?"

"Not at all!"

A partitioning screen split off the inner third of that small space, and it was there that Yumi and the club members were currently. They'd probably done that as a precaution to keep the kidnapped Alice or Yuuki out of view of the general public, but since they had hardly any visitors to their display it didn't look like it would have made a difference if they hadn't had the partitioning screen.

The items they were displaying – a timeline of when detective novels were written, a map on imitation vellum showing how a detective solved an example



case, and others – were of questionable interest. They probably wouldn't be of interest to someone that wasn't already familiar with the genre, and didn't seem to have anything that a huge fan of detective novels wouldn't already know.

Yumi didn't know if her reasoning was correct or not but when visitors did come into the classroom they didn't stay for long. A deserted display seemed to have an invisible sign out front saying, "Boring," which meant fewer people even approached it, leading to a vicious circle.

People would gather at places where there were already people. Alice had said something similar.

"It's like this."

The president said.

"The student council promised that they'd all join the mystery novel society if we held an event that left them speechless. Naturally, we'd also be promoted to full club status."

"I don't know that the kidnapped person would be speechless, though."

"They would. Because, look."

He held out a copy of a book.

"This is a magazine we published ourselves. In it, we set out the plan we enacted today."

""Sherlock and Kogorou?" Is that the magazine's name?"

What an incredible naming sense. It was immediately obvious it was related to detective novels.

"Here, look at this part please. The cover story. The title is, "The mystery of the disappearing student council president." What do you think, isn't it exciting?"

"Um."

Yumi was stuck for words.

Putting it bluntly, it was too straight-forward, with no twist. Hearing the title, her immediate response hadn't been, "What sort of story is that? I want to read it." It left no question about whether or not the student council president would disappear. Sorry, but it felt stale and cliched, even for high school students.

"Since copies of each edition of "Sherlock and Kogorou" are presented to all student council members, if an incident took place that followed the plot of this story, then the magazine would become a gigantic warning notice. And where would that leave the student council who could have stopped it if only they'd read the magazine they'd been given? ... They'd be speechless."

Judging by the title they'd initially been aiming for Yuuki, but while the plan was in motion they'd obviously decided that was impossible and switched over to Alice. But then their initial target had appeared, alone and defenseless, so they switched targets again at the last minute. But, who would believe it, they got the wrong person.

When Yumi pointed this out, they curled in on themselves, saying, "Exactly, it's so embarrassing."

"Then in that case, your plan's failed. Hurry up and let me go."

"I'd really like to do that, but if we let you go it's the end for us."

Obviously, he must have been speaking metaphorically, but his expression was deadly serious. Mistaking one person for another was one thing, but if their group was stuck with the label of, "Insulted the ladies from Lillian's Girls Academy," then Yuuki and the rest of the student council really might disband their society. Instead of being elevated to a proper club, they were facing a complete reversal with the prospect of having their club, err, society, abolished.

"I'm starting to understand why kidnappers kill their hostages."

One of them whispered furtively.

"I know, right. She's seen our faces too."

"It's kinda like, since we've failed already everything from here on is going to be even more of a hassle, so I'd rather just make a run for it."

"We can't run with a hostage."

Hold on a minute. No plotting amongst yourselves, mystery novel club.

"The arrest rate for kidnappers is high!"

Yumi shouted. This seemed to bring the boys back to their senses and they were more reserved in their words.

"– That's just something they say on TV, right?"

"No, it's true. You should know that."

Crackly laughter echoed around the room. Was it really okay for a kidnapping group to get carried away like this?

"I won't say anything. Promise."

Most of all, she just wanted to get out of there quickly.

"Even if you don't say anything, it'll be obvious that we're the kidnappers if we escort you back, right?"

"Then just tell me how to get to the oval. I'll go on my own."

"No way. Even if you're not in your Lillian's uniform, it's obvious you're a girl to anyone that looks closely."

"What are you saying? – You didn't notice."

"That's because it was dark outside the student council room. Besides, you're way more conspicuous since you look like Fukuzawa Yuuki at first glance. If any Hanadera students see you coming out of this room of course they're going to be suspicious."

The leader walked to the other side of the partitioning screen, slid the door open and looked outside. When he came back, he stated definitively, "There's still a lot of people coming and going."

"I know, why don't I get back in the box and you carry me? If you leave me in front of the student council room, I can get out and make my own way back."

Yumi thought she'd had a brilliant idea but the boys frowned and shook their heads.

"I'm sure we'd be apprehended while carrying the box. If Fukuzawa-kun notices his sister's gone missing, he's bound to suspect the box. Even if he didn't, Arisugawa Kintarou saw us carrying it away."

As expected of the mystery novel appreciation society, they were instantly able to see the ramifications of those actions. Although, in reality, over-thinking things made it harder to make a move.

"Well, you're the mystery novel society, aren't you? Surely you can do better."

Yumi swung the plastic bag containing Sachiko-sama's moist towel around. What would her onee-sama be thinking about her slow to return petit soeur? Hopefully she was so busy with the game that she hadn't noticed.

"What happened at the end of your story? Where did the missing student council president wind up?"

She flicked through the pages of the magazine, looking for a hint. The resolution was usually at the end. However.

"I'm not going to die!"

Yumi flopped down over the table.

The student council president was killed, stuffed in the brown box, and left in a corner of the gymnasium storeroom –

"Ah, we weren't really planning on killing your brother."

The leader hastily followed-up.

"Damn straight!"

"We were just going to leave him confined and when the school festival ended we'd nonchalantly lead the other student council members over to the gym storeroom."

"When the school festival ended? The storeroom? Hold on a minute. Sorry, but I can't fill in for my brother like that. The longer this goes on, the worse the situation will get. Um, you remember the "Hanadera War second stage, battle for Lillian?" If I'm not back before that ends, this'll turn into a major scandal."

The student council members tied up with the event and the Yamayurikai members would move as one. When that happened, there would naturally be an uproar even among the general student population.

"Wh-wh-wh what do we do?"

The boys all looked flustered, a bit late now though.

"I don't know why you're asking me. You got yourselves into this, you've got to take responsibility for it. Geeze, how pathetic."

It really was pathetic how far they'd fallen. It made her look like a complete idiot, for being kidnapped by them so easily.

"Ooh, I'm getting annoyed. I wonder if my blood sugar level's dropping."

She said quietly while looking straight at them.

"My apologies. All we've got is candy, but have as much as you like."

Thud, thud, thud. A mountain of lollipops were pulled from somewhere and piled on the table in front of Yumi.

"What, only candy again – "

The moment she picked one up, Yumi was struck by a flash of inspiration.

"Ah! I see, so that was ... Alright!"

"Wh-what?"

Yumi may have been talking to herself a bit too loudly, because the four members of the mystery novel society looked frightened as they asked her this.

"I just had a brilliant idea. Somebody get Kashiwagi-san and bring him here."

"Kashiwagi-san ... um, you mean Kashiwagi-sempai?"

"Right. Kashiwagi Suguru-san. You know him, right?"

"O-of course. But, um, why – "

"Hurry up. I'll explain later. Just maybe, no, it'll definitely work out fine. Trust me."

She gave the timid boys a boot up the backside. Of course, that was a figure of speech, she didn't literally kick them in the butt.

"Go! Quickly!"

"O-okay."

The president tumbled out of the room.

"What a pain, honestly."

Somehow, it had turned into something she never would have imagined when she first arrived.

Yumi, the supposed captive, was ordering around her captors.

She'd said, "Trust me."

Even though she'd been the one to say it, Yumi didn't fully realize its significance.

## Part 5.

"What have you lot – "

When Kashiwagi-san entered the (half) classroom and grasped the situation, he glared demonically at his juniors. Hmm, so the usually smiling, self-assured Kashiwagi-san could get angry like this too. It was quite moving, in a way. However.

"You assholes."

Kashiwagi-san balled his left hand into a fist and he grabbed at one of the boys, so Yumi quickly jumped in between them.

"Calm down, Kashiwagi-san. I'm fine."

"... Yumi-chan."

After resorting to violence, Kashiwagi-san seemed to return to his senses when he saw Yumi, and then in the blink of an eye he was kneeling on the ground.

"I'm sorry. For the rude behavior of my ill-mannered juniors. Really, truly, I don't know how to make this up to you – "

Kneeling down, he brought both hands to the ground. He was, unmistakeably, prostrating himself.



your anger and rage out on me."

"Kashiwagi-san ... "

The proud prince of Hanadera lay prostrate and looked up, begging for forgiveness. His juniors had probably never seen him like this before and, after their initial shock, they quickly followed suit.

"Stop that. I didn't call you here to listen to your apology or to yell at you, Kashiwagi-san."

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, Yumi took Kashiwagi-san by the hand and helped him to his feet. In the period drama Mito Koumon, the villain would usually laugh loudly when someone lay prostrate before them, but that didn't really seem like it would make her feel better.

"More importantly, I need your cooperation. As much as possible, I'd like to keep this from going public."

"Huh, but."

Having been brought in this late in the game, Kashiwagi-san was surprised that it was the victim, Yumi, proposing this.

"Kashiwagi-san, you told me that you'd always listen if I ever asked something of you."

"Yumi-chan, I meant that I'd be overjoyed if I could provide assistance to you. I didn't say that so you could protect these idiotic boys."

"Quit your complaining. Do what I say and get undressed."

"Wha!?"

"Don't argue!"

Yumi caught Kashiwagi-san before he could flee, grabbed hold of the zipper and yanked it down with all her might.

"A-alright. I'll take it off. If I take it off, will you let go of me? I don't mind stripping down, but I don't like being stripped."

As he slowly took his arms out of the sleeves, Kashiwagi-san muttered, "Maybe that's it." Somehow, he seemed to understand what Yumi intended to do. But the others didn't seem to get it, as they kept kneeling and averting their gaze after Kashiwagi-san had stripped down to this T-shirt and shorts.



"Making Yumi-chan go this far – "

Kashiwagi-san looked conflicted as he held out what he had been wearing.

"I should just borrow one thing at a time."

Yumi joked as she took off her geta sandals and put on her other plunder. Perhaps relieved by these words, Kashiwagi-san's usual smile finally returned to his face.

"I see. Thank-you. But, I'm not going to let you bear all the responsibility for this, Yumi-chan."

Kashiwagi-san turned to his four juniors and in a serious voice informed them:

"You lot, line up over there and grit your teeth."

It looked to be quite painful indeed for a man to "take responsibility."

It was five minutes later that Yuuki stepped into the mystery novel society's display area, following the clue from the eyewitness report.

"Yo, Yukichi."

The classroom was absolutely deserted, but on the other side of the partition screen the four members of the mystery novel society and one former member sat facing each other around a couple of desks, playing cards.

"Kashiwagi-sem ... why are you ... "

Obviously, Yuuki was asking why he was there. But there were plenty of other pointed questions he could ask Kashiwagi-sempai, like why was he playing cards, or why was he dressed more or less in his underwear.

"I know, just handing out candy isn't enough to bring in the visitors. As you can tell by our current open but empty state. Why don't you have a seat and play some poker too?"

"Now's not the time."

He declined the offer and slowly scanned the classroom. There was no sign of Yumi.

"What's up?"

Kashiwagi-sempai asked. Since he'd graduated, he wouldn't officially be a member of the mystery novel appreciation society, but he still acted like he was in charge.

In contrast, the four official members kept playing cards, with their heads down, as though they'd been told, "No talking." Their behavior was far too stiff.

"I'm looking for Yumi."

Yuuki said.

"Yumi-chan? She's not here."

Again, it was Kashiwagi-sempai that answered.

"Really?"

"Take a look around if you don't believe me."

"Alright."

Since he'd been given permission, Yuuki immediately started a search of the classroom. Beneath the tables, out on the verandah, in the broom closet. He also checked each of the lockers, but naturally they were all locked and none of them opened. On second thought, she wouldn't be able to fit in such a small place anyway ... No, maybe she'd just barely fit.

"Yukichi. Found Yumi-chan?"

While Yuuki was turning the classroom upside down, the five of them continued playing cards.

(Five people, including Kashiwagi-sempai.)

All four proper members of the mystery novel society were present. Assuming an accomplice of theirs had taken Yumi away, he couldn't think of anywhere else they would have taken her.

(A box with someone in it would be pretty heavy to carry. So they must have carried her to somewhere close by.)

Since the student festival was so packed with people, they wouldn't have left something as dangerous as that lying around without someone watching it. But the four of them were here.

(So that means.)

Even though he had come here based on an eyewitness report, he may have been mistaken about their participation in this. Just as Yuuki started to think this, he noticed what Kashiwagi-sempai was using in place of a chair.

"That's."

The distinctive brown cardboard box.

Kashiwagi-sempai moved aside and Yuuki was able to confirm that there were still traces of cellophane tape from when they'd removed the warning notice he'd stuck to it.

Yuuki opened the box. But Yumi wasn't in there. Just an old pair of geta sandals.

"Yukichi."

Kashiwagi-sempai said, continuing to play cards while standing.

"I think the mystery novel society is deserving of whatever punishment you give them, so I'm not going to defend them ... but, in deference to Yumi-chan, forgive them, just this time. These idiots are reflecting on their actions too."

"Yumi!?"

Yuuki latched on to that name.

"You said Yumi!?"

"Yeah. She really is a good girl."

So she really was here then. At the very least, there was no doubt that Kashiwagi-sempai had been in contact with Yumi at some point that day.

Yuuki had another look at the four "idiots." They continued playing cards as though nothing had happened, but there was a red mark on each of their right cheeks, as though they'd been struck with an open hand. Based on that, he could figure out more or less what had happened.

Kashiwagi-sempai snapped his fingers and the four stood up as one and bowed deeply, saying, "We're very sorry."

Having admitted their crime, Yuuki instinctively balled his right hand into a fist and was about to draw back and strike when he remembered the words, "In deference to Yumi-chan," and managed to keep himself in check.

"At any rate, she was just like you'd expect from the student council president's older sister. She really was a wonderful person."

Said the president of the mystery novel society.

"Wonderful?"

Yuuki asked. What on earth had Yumi done to these guys?

"She was kind, but tough when she had to be. And that's not all."

(Yumi was?)

"She said I should cool down and let me borrow her precious hand towel."

(Hang on. That was Sachiko-san's.)

"And she has a cute face."

(Hey, watch what you're saying. Yumi and I have the same face.)

"At any rate, we've all been enchanted by her."

The four of them clapped their hands together, as though they were praying to the cross.

"If you lot say one more word I'll redden your left cheeks too."

Unable to listen to them compliment his sister any longer, Yuuki finally drew his fist back, ready to strike. Then Kashiwagi-sempai defused the situation by saying, "Now, now."

"Enchanted by your sister? Isn't that wonderful, Yukichi? If you're going to get that jealous, I'll have to call you a sis-con."

A sis-con? Yuuki shook off the hand that Kashiwagi-sempai had placed over his fist and looked away.

"So where is Yumi now then?"

"Oh? You should have passed each other at some point."

Kashiwagi-sempai smiled knowingly as he laid his cards down on the table.

"Passed each other? No, we didn't."

"Ah, so you didn't notice her then. Such a shame."

"What do you mean?"

What on earth was he saying? There was no way Yuuki wouldn't have noticed the person he was desperately searching for, if they'd passed each other.

"Just before you arrived, Yumi walked out of this classroom on her own two feet."

"What!?"

Yuuki dashed out of the room upon hearing Kashiwagi-sempai's words. However.

"Hey, Yukichi."

He was held back by that quiet voice.

"I'm sure you're busy, but you should try reading the complimentary copy some time."

Yuuki immediately came to a halt and slowly turned around.

""Sherlock and Kogorou?" I'm in the middle of it right now. "Detective Panda and the Case of the Lollipop Murders" is pretty interesting."

"That so?"

Kashiwagi-san flashed a smile.

"Since you're such a good kid, Yukichi, I'll give you a hint. Yumi-chan wouldn't have looked like Yumi-chan."

"Huh ... ?"

He'd said that Yumi had walked out of there, but the geta sandals were still here. So that meant –

"Don't tell me ... it was that?"

"It would most likely be what you're thinking."

Yuuki remembered that they had actually passed each other. While he was on the way here. It wasn't Yumi, but it had definitely left a memorable impression on him.

"Catch you later, sempai."

Yuuki hurriedly left the classroom.

He rushed down the corridor, grumbling at his sister.

– How the heck was he supposed to recognize her looking like that?

## Part 6.

It was hot.

Yumi took a deep breath.

That was understandable, since she was wearing another layer – a fur coat – on top of the boy's school uniform. Furthermore, it was September. It was a heat endurance test.

Sweat was pouring out of her body. But there was no way for her to wipe it off. She'd put it on without a second thought, but it was pretty tough to wear.

What time was it now?

She looked at her left wrist, for what she expected to be there. But, naturally, her watch wasn't there. She was still wearing it but it was hidden at the moment.

(A clock, a clock ... )

There should be clocks everywhere throughout the school building, but now that she was searching for one they were hard to find. She thought that if she got out of the school building she should be able to see a large clock in a prominent position somewhere but since she was unfamiliar with this school she had no idea which door would lead her where.

Thinking that she had to make it back to the oval, she'd descended to the ground floor, but from there it was hard to tell where to go. The boys had politely informed her of how to get back, but it was hard to picture the route since she'd been blindfolded and carried in a box on the way there.

At any rate, it looked like she was lost.

If she'd known it would turn out like this, she would have called out to Yuuki when they passed each other.

But there hadn't been much of an opportunity for her to call out before her brother ran past looking preoccupied. She could have chased after him, but she really didn't feel like explaining those missing minutes or her current appearance in the crowded hallway if she drew his attention. Apart from that, her head was filled with thoughts of getting back to her onee-sama as soon as possible, since her onee-sama must be worried about her. Thinking about it now, Yuuki may have been

running around looking for his missing and unaccounted for sister. It would be bad if that was the case.

"Excuse me, how do I get to the oval?"

Yumi called out to a student with an armband, that looked to be some sort of official.

"The oval? Haha, the oval. Um, there's a shortcut out that emergency exit."

"Much obliged."

She tried to bow her head but lost her balanced and stumbled a little bit. Not only was she getting hot flushes but her head was heavy.

"Are you alright?"

"Ah, sorry about that."

Thanks to the support of the boy with the armband, Yumi somehow managed to avoid falling down.

"No problem. By the way, you're going to take part in the battle for Lillian's, right? You should get a hurry on because the time's almost up."

"Um, what time is it now?"

She thought she'd ask, since she had the chance.

"3:25."

He chuckled when he checked his watch.

"Thanks. Really. Well then."

She didn't bow this time around, but walked off in the direction of the shortcut he'd indicated.

"Hey, dude. Watch your head on the door."

The kind boy said, laughing all the while. Well, that was pretty much unavoidable. Everyone was pointing and laughing at Yumi.

When she went out the door, she momentarily forgot his advice and, misjudging the door frame, she bumped her head. But apart from that, she managed to get outside smoothly. So she thought.

She spotted the oval after walking a short distance.

The white, yellow and red towers were all standing proudly, like impregnable fortresses.



There were no longer any brave heroes climbing the slides. There was just the scattered corpses (not really) of the valiant warriors strewn everywhere.

Without any hesitation, Yumi walked towards the red tower.

Her onee-sama was at its summit. Thinking that, she quickly felt better.

A hundred metres to go.

She staggered on, along the unfamiliar path in her unsteady outfit.

Seventy metres to go.

Yumi's field of vision wasn't that great just now, but she could still clearly see Sachiko-sama atop the tower. The two big guys beside her were probably the Yakushiji brothers.

With fifty metres to go, the sound of someone blowing on a conch shell rang out, informing everyone that the game was over. The "Hanadera war's second stage, the battle for Lillian" had just finished.

In the end, she hadn't been able to make it back before the game was over. But Yumi's "Hanadera war" hadn't ended just yet.

Out of compassion, she'd left the moist towel with the boys of the mystery novel club. Not only was she late returning, but she hadn't brought what she set out to get either. Plus, she'd loaned Sachiko-sama's personal belongings to other people – what an outrageous soeur.

To make matters worse, this outfit – . How would her onee-sama react if she knew this was Yumi?

Even so, Yumi kept walking. She'd been in too much of a hurry to get changed. She wanted to see her onee-sama as soon as possible.

At that moment.

As Sachiko-sama sat atop the tower, it looked as though she cast her gaze down at the ground and then suddenly stood up. Then, as Yumi looked on in shock, Sachiko-sama started climbing down the ladder.

In spite of the height.

Paying no mind to the fact that she was wearing a skirt.

(Onee-sama!!)

She shouldn't be able to tell that it was Yumi there. She shouldn't be able to tell but – .

Yumi desperately continued forcing her way forward, one foot after the other. By now, Sachiko-sama had reached the ground and was rushing towards her.

And then.

"I'm so glad ... Yumi!"

Right after calling this out, Sachiko-sama embraced the panda.

"Onee-sama."

Yumi was deeply moved as they embraced tightly.

"You knew it was me ... "

Inside the stuffy panda head, her sweat and tears mixed together. Yumi would've been happy to get out of the costume already, but she wanted to embrace her onee-sama forever, so she stayed as she was.

Without knowing why, Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan came over, followed by Rei-sama and Shimako-san who were delayed getting down from their towers.

Amused by the sight of Lillian's Girls Academy's Rosa Chinensis embracing someone in a panda suit, the injured soldiers stood up and slowly gathered around.

Even so, they did not separate.

Because, her onee-sama had proven it.

That even if Yumi didn't look like Yumi, she would never mistake her.

*"Even if I was in a silent world of pitch black, if you were there I'd know instantly, Yumi."*

– Yes, onee-sama.

*"Even if you were lying in bed wrapped in bandages like an Egyptian mummy, I'd still be able to identify you."*

– Yes, onee-sama.

Yumi revisited that conversation and agreed with her onee-sama.

She couldn't look for greater happiness than that.

# Afterword

It's **Hanadera** Academy but it has a **school** festival, why's that?

Hello, this is Konno.

The long summer vacation is over and the Yamayurikai members are finally returning to Lillian's Girls Academy. At long last, it's the second term. Plunging into school festival season.

The setting for this volume is September. It goes on sale in July. The writing's running a bit ahead. Considering that "Maria-sama ga Miteru" usually runs completely counter to the seasons, it's not that far out. Having said that, the story of Yumi's first-year Valentine's Day was published in the magazine about six months after the story of Noriko's entry to Lillian's, so even the sense of years is a bit suspicious.

Incidentally, I'll take the opportunity to settle the matter of Yuuki's birthday in "Cool Breeze." If I remember right, he's the second person to have their birthday made known, after Satou Sei. Such a cheeky younger brother – even Yumi's and Sachiko's birthdays haven't been made public yet. Lots of people were under the impression that he was born in March, but that was a feint.

Going on the theory that it would cause quite a stir to read about it, the last day for an "early-year" birth is April 1st. That's the ridiculous sounding truth (not an April fool).

A follow-on from that is that in the Japanese civil code, your age goes up by one not on your birthday but on the preceding day, so someone born on the first of April would be one on the 31st of March, and therefore included in the previous year's cohort. I don't know whether or not that's of benefit or not.

Following that reasoning, when filling out official documents on the day before your birthday, you have to add one to your age. I don't think that's pervasive.

... Now then, this is a problem. With just a few lines left, I'm reminded that I haven't got an answer to the question I posed in the first line. Since I'd feel bad if I

kept writing, I'd like you all to have a think and come up with an answer on your own. If you come up with a good answer, I'd be overjoyed if you sent me a letter with that in the corner. (Again, overjoyed!)

*It's OO but it's OO all the same.*

That's the expected form of the answer. Now then, let the challenge begin!

– Konno Oyuki